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SEPT. 22 WEEKLY

That Son-of-a-Gun—Columbo

Haitian Novelette by

Theodore Roscoe

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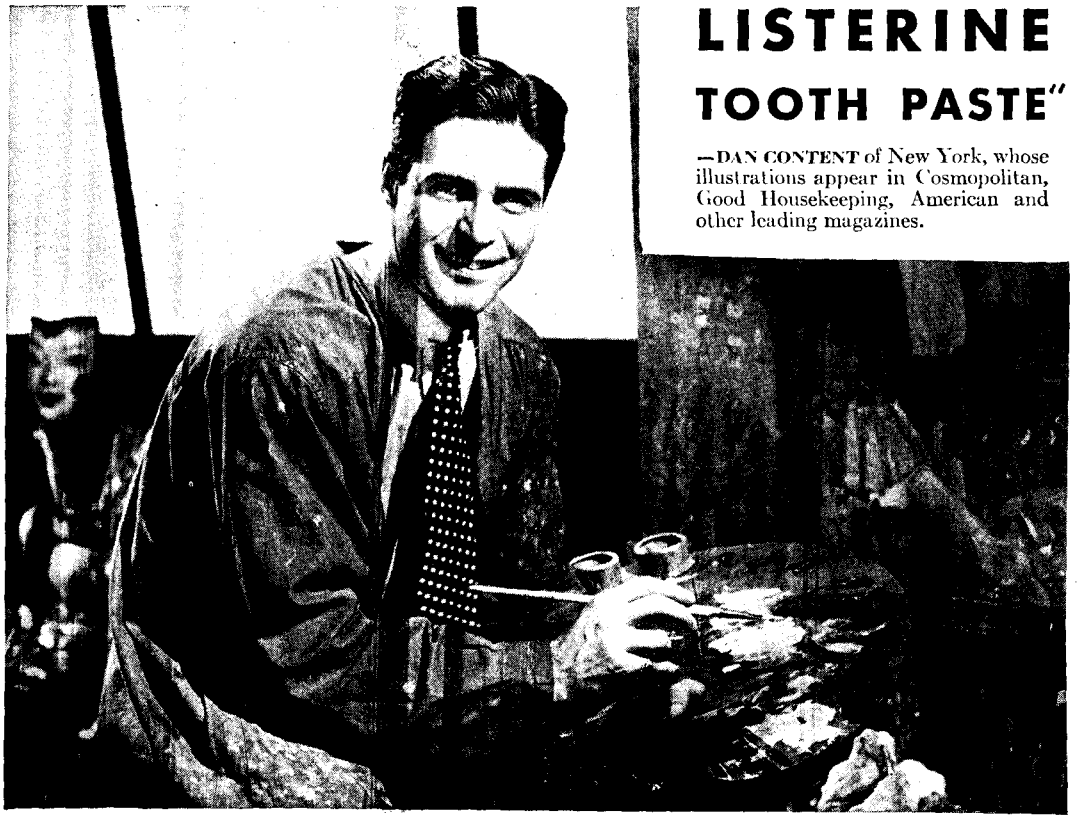

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Action Stories of Every Variety

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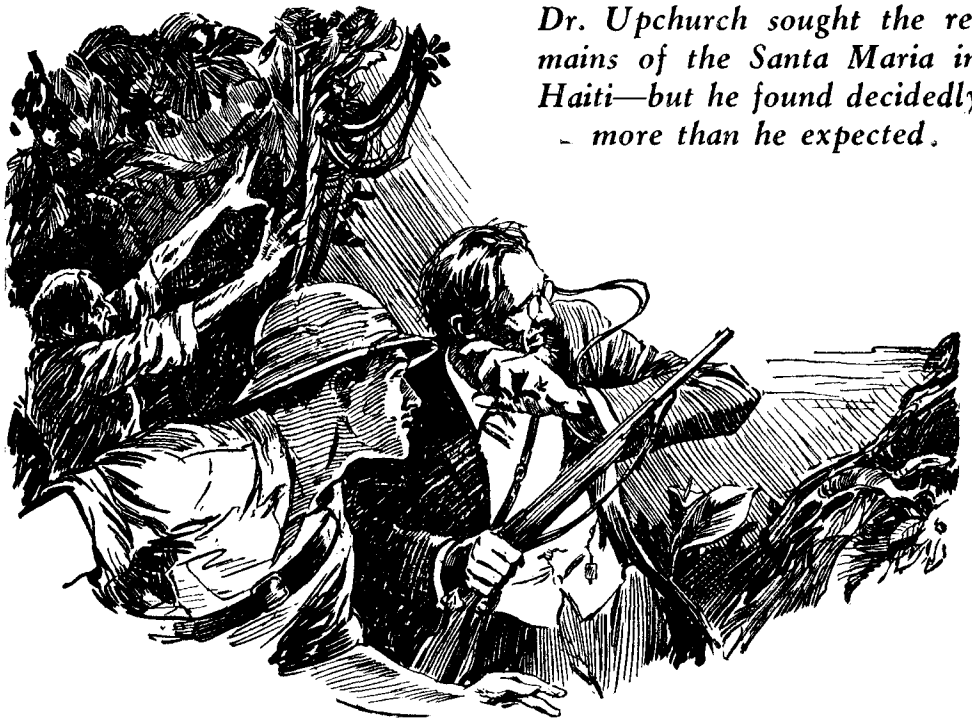
That Son of a Gun Columbo

By THEODORE ROSCOE

Author of "The Spy with the Bald Head," "Lady of Hades," etc.



Dr. Upchurch sought the remains of the Santa Maria in Haiti—but he found decidedly more than he expected.

PROLOGUE

In Fourteen Hundred Ninety-two—
Away Off From I—talee—
Co-lumbus sailed the o—schun blooo—
In Search Of Hot Tomaleeee—

THAT was the way it started, with that song. It seemed appropriate. A big, dollar-round Caribbean moon was wheeling down the sky, and the sea curved blue and away with a path of silver to the horizon. Starshine and tropic dark cloaked Port au Prince with that nameless witchery brewed only in lower latitudes—that moment of mellow twilight and after-dinner drinks. One could forget the day at "Hasco," the Haitian American Sugar Company with its factories, din and smell down by the Cul de Sac, and the low price of cane. One could almost like it. Harley, the newcomer, was young, and the evening's romance was not lost on him. He lifted his voice in the lampshine, waved his glass.

"Oh—he thought the worllld was round—O!"

How many campfires, how many places of pipe and flowing bowl have heard the ballad? The rest of us hummed the refrain. But McCord, the big engineer who had lived in Haiti longer than most of us, held a drink in his mouth, stopped his empty glass in mid air, swung to glare at the "Hasco" youngster.

McCord swallowed, and his palm struck the table with a bang. "Where'd you get that? That song!"

The boy pretended offense. "That's a

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Novelette—
Complete

He looked starved—almost a specter in armor

nice way to interrupt a crooner." He saw the big man's face. " Gee, what's the—"

It wasn't like McCord. Ordinarily he sat his evenings among us in silence, one might almost have said in solitude. On occasion he might join a word to our small talk, but we knew him as a man becalmed with his own thoughts. Now his copper-tinged countenance was tight at the jaws; his eyes fixed in a strange, bright look that went on past the boy, past the veranda, downhill over the starlit rooftops and far to seaward beyond the headlands of Haiti that reached for the moon.

Harley sidestepped to avoid the gaze. " Gosh," he apologized, " I thought everybody knew Columbo! Didn't you ever hear it before?"

" Did I ever? That son of a gun Columbo! Well, maybe you don't know it," McCord described a sweep with his arm, " but he sailed the Santa Maria down the skyline right out there. You bet he did. Fourteen Ninety Two, it was, and December when he came to Haiti—"

We had heard Columbus had discovered Haiti, but as " Hasco " employees, our heads had been too glutinous with sugar to ever think about it. And Lord only knew what note in Harley's lyric had struck this responsive chord in the big engineer's sandy head.

" Columbus cruised around those headlands and came along up the south coast," he went on in a voice as queer as his eye. " If you've never been up the south coast, don't go. Devil of a shore, all rivers, deep gorges, channels and whatnot never been explored to this day. Maps go in a little way and peter out. Haiti isn't tame yet, in spite of sugar mills and country club and shows. In 1492 it was a whole lot wilder, and I've an idea Columbus was sort of wild himself. History tells he ran the Santa Maria aground; had to pull the ship to pieces and build a blockhouse of the wood. Then, history says, he went back to Isabella and eventually died in chains." McCord leaned out of his chair and said, " I could tell something different, myself."

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We stared at him. "What do you mean, something different?"

"I've heard Columbus never went back to Spain from Haiti," the big man whispered. "I've heard he sailed the Santa Maria into one of those unexplored rivers down there and never came out alive. I mean, when he did come out he was dead, and—"

"When he came out he was dead?" Harley cried.

"As the grave," McCord nodded. "And the Santa Maria was dead. The sailors from Spain had passed away. The beautiful native princess they had captive on board was cold as ice. And Columbus, himself, jumping around the deck of that gone-to-hell caravel just as dead as a corpse. Dead with his eyes stark open and the back of his head smashed in—and when I saw him coming at me—"

A glass went over. The big engineer was nodding to himself, his eyes veiled, shining darkly, strange.

"*You saw Christopher Columbus?*"

"Right here in Haiti," McCord growled his astounding answer. "I saw Christopher Columbus. It was in Nineteen Thirteen, and that's where I first heard the song. And if you want to listen I'll tell you about it, but you've got to promise not to call me a liar until I'm through—"

We wanted to listen, and we promised. But before he was through—

CHAPTER I.

A PAGE FROM THE DIARY OF COLUMBUS!

IN Nineteen Thirteen (the big engineer began) I was a down-at-heel surveying engineer stranded in Haiti without a gaboon to spit in or window to throw it out of, and the sharper who'd hired me blew out with the rest of my baggage, and I drifted into Goava without a sou. When I found another white man there—and living there by choice!—I could have dropped in surprise. They say when Eve finished her apple and looked around for a place to throw the core, the Lord decided He needed a garbage incinerator and made Goava.

You wouldn't sing after supper in that port. Dead fish, dead fever, dead heat, half dead natives, and dead souls who, according to gossip, floated out of their graves and strolled the beach at night. They were having *zombie* scares all over Haiti at the time, and Goava was a hot bed of superstition. Living *zombie* corpses were supposed to be everywhere, and the whole town rattled gourds and went to bed early.

I didn't have a friend in Haiti, and my nearest relative was a spinster aunt somewhere up in Ohio, the sort of old lady who wouldn't help a nephew even if he knew where to write for it. Dimly I recalled she'd always disapproved of men who didn't know enough to stay home and milk for Grandpa. Down and out, penniless, I'd have sold myself to the Devil for a ticket out of Haiti and that stinking black town. What in thunder was this other white man doing there?

First and last there's some queer fish down the Caribbean, and this specimen wasn't last. He presented himself as Roy Upchurch; Professor Upchurch—ahem!—with a string of Ph.D's, P.D.Q's and B.V.D's about nine miles long. I came up the beach and he came down the beach, and when he spied me he was at me like a welcoming mayor attacking a visiting fire chief.

"I'm from Harvard, yes. But just at present doing research on my own. My, my, but it's good to see a white man; I haven't seen one in years. Do come to my house, Mr. McCord; I must tell you about my fascinating work—"

Picture to yourself the typical college prof—classic brow, absent-minded stare, book in elbow and hand under coat tails—lank as Abe Lincoln, and you get an idea of Professor Upchurch as I met him in Goava. Owlish glasses pinched to his nose, inspecting me, made him a little austere; but when he took them off his face possessed a sort of mocking good humor, fringed as it was with apricot colored whiskers that stuck out every-which-way like the petals of a sun flower. But he wasn't

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old. A youthful enthusiasm, a burning energy twitched out of the chap and you had the feeling his skeleton was wired instead of veined. Or perhaps he wound himself up every morning with the gold Phi Bete Key that dangled on his watch chain.

The black Haitians bumped their foreheads on the sand as he came up the beach; and I sized him up at once as a fanatic. But I wanted white company, too, and he promised a drink, so I trailed along.

His hut was like a dog house, littered with books and papers in amazing confusion; and the minute we got inside the door behind an open bottle, he hung the owls on his nose and launched a quiz. Had I, by chance, ever heard of Martin Pinzon? Did I know the writings of Mandeville? Was I at all familiar with Las Casas, the early maps of Bedaire and Pietro Toscanelli? When he found I could speak Spanish and Creole, he hauled out a pack of ancient geographies and began pumping me about Haiti. He shouted, "Splendid!" when I told him I'd surveyed along the coast, and snowed me under a blizard of notebooks, scrolls, queer old Spanish maps painted with sea serpents and curleycues.

Naturally I was a bit taken back, meeting such a fellow in that God-forsaken town, going to his hut and finding myself caught in a fast game of Twenty Questions. All this time I was wondering what in the devil was the "fascinating work" he'd threatened to tell me about. Finally I had to ask him.

"Why, it's this!" he enthused. "Don't you see? I'm a professor of history, and doing a book on the subject."

He tossed on my lap an old vellum-bound volume: *Historia del Nuevo Mundo,* and, before I could figure that, he was turning the pages of an encyclopedia.

"What subject?" I wanted to know.

"Why," he cried, "the most fascinating subject in all the world. The Genoese Explorer! The Viceroy of Spain and Admiral of the Ocean. The subject of this famous painting by Sebastiano del Piombo"—opening a page and pointing at a colored portrait—"the subject of Christopher Columbus!"

THE subject of Christopher Columbus! Now you see how the story gets around toward that little song of yours. If you listen closely you'll hear it beating an off-key undertone through the rest of this Baron Munchausen affair.

Columbus! Columbus! Columbus! Upchurch could talk of nothing or nobody else. I sat half the night in that hut with my neck sweating, my knees buried under a mound of ancient cartographs and Italian first editions, learning more about the life and times of Christopher Columbus than I'd ever learned about myself in thirty years.

"Just consider the wonderful man," Upchurch barked at me, "the way he started across the unknown ocean with those three little boats! He landed first in the Bahamas and left the Pinto behind to explore, and came on to Haiti with the Nina and Santa Maria. My! He though Haiti was Zipangu (the mainland of Japan, you know) and he was sure he'd find the streets paved with gold."

Upchurch pinned me down with a finger. "Consider the man's courage and imagination. Oh, he had a great deal of imagination. You should read his Journal with its accounts of sea demons and giant serpents. And anointing his head with such fantastic titles as Viceroy of Spain and Admiral of the Ocean! Admiral, indeed! Why, he'd started across Spain as a dress goods salesman and ended up in Isabella's court offering to sail a fleet to India. Any sailor in his crew could navigate better than Columbus, and he never even learned how to read a chart!"

The professor laughed, waving his hands as he lectured. "There was his father a bankrupt weaver in Genoa, and Columbus pretending all kinds of swanky titles and a big family tree. To this day there's a tremendous amount of confusion about his real name. Sometimes he called himself Christopher Columbus and sometimes it was Colon and Christoferens, and again he

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claimed kinship with a Gascon noble named Coullon. At his death he insisted he was related to one Count Columbo, descendent of the Roman general, Colonius. You can see that picturesque explorer standing on the bow of his little caravel somewhere off Haiti, telling his sailors to hurry ashore and find gold. Why, there wasn't enough gold on this island to take back to Spain in a hat, and what the Spanish sailors *did* take back—my dear fellow, that's another story.

"And just imagine the Haitian aborigines — Arawak Indians they were called—creeping out of the bushes to look at the white men. The poor, meek Indians, they were harmless as pigeons, you know. They thought the white men had come from heaven, but they soon found out differently. My, yes! The Spaniards didn't have any use for them and set about exterminating them most thoroughly. So thoroughly that there wasn't a handful left alive a hundred years later, and today they're extinct. The poor Indians were taken for slaves and their women were meek and good looking—it isn't the chapter on Columbus they like to teach in public schools.

"But one must remember Columbus was a product of his generation, and all the white explorers were hard on the Indians. And then Columbus was probably in a temper because he couldn't find any gold and (he was a bad navigator, of course) he ran the Santa Maria on the rocks. The sailors dismantled her and built a blockhouse of her timbers on the beach and called it Natividad. Columbus christened the island Hispaniola and returned to Spain on the Nina to tell the Queen about it. Next year he returned to Haiti and found the blockhouse burnt to the ground. Poor fellow, he went back to Spain and finally got mixed up in a wretched court intrigue, dying disgracefully in irons—"

UPCHURCH paced the mud floor, cranked up like a school teacher. "That's the story of Columbus you can find in any history book, and on top of that there's a whole mass of legend. It's the legendary aspect of the man that brings me here in research. Think, man! How would you like to see where the Santa Maria lay anchored? How would you like to stand on the very spot where the Great Discoverer once stood?"

I was thinking I didn't give a tinker's toot where Columbus once stood, and it might have been better for me if Haiti had never been discovered. Columbus wasn't half as remarkable, to my way of looking, as this cracked history prof who'd bury himself in a place like Goava to study that early voyager. I was interested that first evening, but two weeks later I was downright bored. All you had to do was say "Christopher," and Upchurch would be off like a phonograph.

Well, I'd have starved under that fellow's history-book nose if things hadn't started to happen. And when anything happens down there in Goava (where nothing ever happened before) it's liable to start with a bang. One day while we were off in the forest—Upchurch with nose sniffing history, and me with my nose sniffing bananas—a strang white man came to Goava. All of a sudden a bunch of natives came running through the dusk to find us and tell us about it. Any white man was unusual in that God-forsaken dump, enough to set the blacks chattering like guinea hens; but this stranger had been looking for somebody. The natives described him as a tall man who carried a rifle and a little leather bag and wore a khaki sun helmet and a big black beard. "*Gros moon!*" they shouted at Upchurch. Plenty big man!

I supposed it was a doctor of some sort. No, the natives blurted, it wasn't a doctor. The stranger hadn't been able to speak or understand much Creole, but had managed to inquire if there were any white men in Goava, and the blacks had said there were two of us and that we were off in the jungle. That had excited the black-bearded stranger. He'd run up the beach to look into the professor's hut; then he'd chased off in the jungle and hadn't been seen since.

For once in his life Upchurch forgot

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Christopher Columbus. "What?" he shouted. "This stranger looked into my house? Quick, McCord! Come with me quick! He may have stolen—by heaven!—if it's gone—"

Lord knew what anybody would steal from Upchurch's hut; when we got there he set off pawing through his books and rubbish with wild yelps. Then he came up from the bottom of the heap with a little metal tube in his fingers, his face disheveled with relief.

"Thank God! I was a fool to leave it behind. Close the door, my friend, and I'll tell you what it is!"

I CLOSED the door. He crossed to a window to peek into the night. He peered under the table and sent a glare around that wolf's den as if he thought the walls were Peeping Toms. I supposed it was a diamond or something. His shaky fingers unscrewed the lid and he plucked from the tube a roll of faded parchment; unfolded the thing as if it were a million dollar banknote too sacred for mortal touch.

"This," he whispered, his sun-flower face wearing the queerest expression yet, "is my rarest possession and a sight seen by no other living man. A page from the diary of Christopher Columbus!"

Myself, I'd rather have seen a lettuce sandwich, and I'd have punched that savant in the whiskers if the shine behind his goggles hadn't paralyzed me. Then I wasn't only paralyzed, but ossified.

"McCord," he hoarsed at me, "how would you like to make a thousand dollars?"

How would I like to make a thousand dollars? It sobered me so I couldn't even yell. "A thousand dollars for what?" I gasped.

"Ever since you came here I've had you under observation," the professor husked, "and I've decided to let you in on this and make you an offer. You told me you knew this Haitian coast."

"All too well," I said bitterly, wondering whom he wanted me to murder, and quite prepared to hire for the job. Wanting to get out of Haiti like I did, I'd have almost signed a contract to commit suicide for a thousand dollars.

Upchurch scratched in his apricot-colored whiskers and sat me down with a stare. "You know I came here to write a book on Columbus, and now I'll tell you the secret. Nobody really knows where Columbus landed in Haiti. We read how the Santa Maria was run on the rocks, dismantled and made into a blockhouse called Natividad, but is it true?" He began to fiddle excitedly with the Phi Bete Key on his vest, talking low, rapid words. "There is no authentic record of that misadventure, my friend. Some authorities claim Natividad, the blockhouse, was up North on the coastline near Santo Domingo. Bah! I've been up there, myself, and there isn't a trace of such a blockhouse. No real proof! Even if it was burned to the ground after it was built there'd be ashes, scrap iron, something for the records. Now where do you think that blockhouse was?"

I told Upchurch he was telling me.

"Why, listen," he gulped mysteriously, "I think there *wasn't* any! There wasn't any blockhouse called Natividad. No! You see, it's true Columbus left the Pinta in the Bahamas and proceeded to Haiti with the Nina and Santa Maria. It has also been proved that Martin Pinzon, Columbus's second in command and captain of the Pinta, disliked the Admiral. They had a row, you know. Columbus didn't like Pinzon, and Pinzon distrusted Columbus.

"Now there's a legend—legend, mind you—that Columbus, coming to Haiti by himself, sailed the Santa Maria up an inland river and got lost and never came back. When the Santa Maria failed to return that scared Pinzon. Pinzon figured Queen Isabella, who knew of his quarrel with Columbus, would think he'd scuttled the Santa Maria out of spite."

UPCHURCH'S lecturing voice went off key, telling me this bedtime story. "The legend says," he hoarsed on, "that there was a sailor in Pinzon's crew—an Italian who somewhat

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resembled Columbus. To save his uneasy reputation, Pinzon bribed the expedition, trained this Italian sailor to act and talk like Columbus, invented a plausible story about the Santa Maria going aground on the rocks, and worked off the masquerade on Isabella of Spain. You see it, don't you? Another man went back to Spain as Columbus, while the Admiral himself had actually disappeared with the Santa Maria somewhere in Haiti!"

When he came to this part of his story, the professor's eyes were blazing like bonfires. "McCord, I'm trying to find where the Santa Maria *went!* Couldn't a little ship like that be easily lost in one of these jungle rivers? And Pinzon could have faked another sailor as Columbus. They'd been absent from Spain a long time and Isabella wouldn't have known the difference. And then, finally, there's this page of diary I found in an old convent up in Port au Prince. Look! Do you see that signature?"

The man's low-pitched prattle filled the hut with excited nerves; and I found myself staring at that dim-written parchment, signed with a flourish, *Xpoferens.*

"What does it mean?" I grated.

"If it isn't forged," Upchurch whispered, "that stands for 'Christoferens'—one of the ways the Admiral signed his name. And it's dated December Tenth, Fourteen Ninety Two. It's written in medieval Italian, and in the first line the writer says he is lost. He goes on to say he has fever and is going to die. He says the Santa Maria is lost in a river and cannot be turned around. He says the crew is dying, too, and he writes this last message as he sits on the river bank under an old sablier tree. And signed, 'Christoferens!' Great Scott, man, don't you understand? It means I can scoop the greatest story in the world. If I can find—"

"Where do I come in?" I interrupted.

"From my studies with ancient maps I've deduced that Columbus sailed somewhere along this south coast. You say you know the country. I need a guide. McCord, I will pay you five hundred dollars to find me an unexplored river with a sablier tree on its bank, and another five hundred if we locate the Santa Maria—"

I glared at him. A thousand dollars! Five hundred just to lead him to a river flowing by a sablier tree, and another five hundred if we dug up some waterlogged timbers or rotten anchor chains or something. Well, the first five hundred was a cinch.

"When do we start?" I grinned.

He fished in his pants, yanked out a roll of bills that made my eyes water, and counted five yellow ones on my palm. "Tomorrow! Just the two of us, mind! I'll leave the provisions to you—wait—somebody's coming!"

The words weren't out of his mouth, the bankroll buried and the wonderful diary page jammed down his shirt, before knuckles drummed on the door and a thick voice hailed, "You, in there. A Professor Upchurch live here?"

Without waiting for the answer, the door was pushed inward and two men loomed in the frame. One was a Negro in military khaki, his black face stern under the helmet of the *Garde d'Haiti.* The other was a stubby white man, freckled as a leopard, eyes like blue slits under the brim of an old straw hat, his spotted cheek swollen with chewing tobacco, his spotted hands knotted on a Winchester rifle.

"What the hell," I said.

"To what am I grateful for this intrusion?" Upchurch said.

"I'm Detective Cap'n Thomas from the States, and this is Lieutenant Benoit of the Haitian police," the freckled man said. "We want a guy who's got the dope on Christopher Columbus!"

CHAPTER II.

BLACKBEARD!

YOU can see Upchurch standing there, goggles owlish in their nest of apricot whiskers, mouth annoyed. "You've come to the right place, gentlemen. I'm an authority on Columbus."

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I thought the freckled man was a trifle biffed by that sun-flower face. Who wouldn't be? He turned to fire a comet of juice at the jungle, and when his face came around again his eyes were worried.

"They said there was a history professor doin' research around here. I figured this other bird might be around, too, seein' he's interested in the same thing. Didn't know but what you'd of seen him."

"Seen who?" I challenged, moving up with a candle.

The freckled man's eyes swivelled at me, and he shifted the rifle to put a hand in his pocket and hold out a badge. "I'm tailin' a criminal. Fella named Denver. Frank Denver. One of these master minds that can crack a safe like it was cheese. Escaped Atlanta to rob some valuable charts out of a museum in Washington. Stuff worth a fortune. About Columbus."

"I heard about that," Upchurch cried. "He stole an original Mercator, charts of Hispaniola—"

"Yeah, and I finally trailed him to Haiti, but I lost the track. When I got wind of a history researcher in Goava I came toot sweet, thinking this crook might try and sell you some of this valuable boodle. Just a hunch, because he might of come two years ago—the trail's that cold. But a white man oughta stand out like a sore thumb on this coast. Month ago I ran into a party takin' pictures down the coast, and they hadn't seen a soul. Aside from them it was like a desert." The freckled man spat. "This crook is after gold."

"Gold?" Upchurch plucked off his glasses and polished them, classroom-fashion. "How absurd. Any student knows there's no gold in Haiti—"

"I don't know about that," the freckled man rumbled. "I only know the Department figures he stole those charts because they said something about Columbus and Haiti and buried gold. Well—maybe in your work around here you'll run across the guy, and I better warn you he's bad medicine. A tall man. Jet black hair an' beard. And when he left the States he was carryin' a leather suitcase—"

"A tall man! Black beard! Carrying a bag!" I let fly a yell. "A man like that went through here this afternoon."

"Yes, yes, yes!" Upchurch remembered. "While we were in the jungle. A stranger—"

"Where'd he go?" the freckled man boomed. "Quick—"

"Off in the jungle. The blacks didn't know!"

"Steer way clear of him if you see him," the freckled man shouted; then he jumped out of the doorway, the Negro after him, and they were gone. I could hear them pounding off through the night, and I stood looking at the vacuum where they'd been, too surprised to move. Seemed to me this business of Christopher Columbus was getting pretty popular all the sudden. Upchurch slid by me; shut the door with a slam.

"You hear that, McCord? People down the coast taking pictures and a criminal come here to hunt gold with stolen charts? Tourists and crooks? Oh, my God—"

His classroom attitude was gone. He caught my lapel; simply quaked with rage. "I came here to do my research in seclusion. Now they're everywhere. Sight-seers! Policemen! And this dirty black-bearded criminal—but he mustn't find the Santa Maria! We must get there first, you hear me? We can't have the greatest story in history exposed by a batch of stupid fools! It's mine! All these years I've worked, slaved—it's mine—"

I GOT the idea all right. Columbus had been first to discover America, and Upchurch wanted to be first to discover Columbus. That "scoop" for his history book. Pretty mythical sort of prize, but you know how it is with scholars who devote their lives to a subject.

"Well," he panted. "Are you going to stand there? I've paid you to find me a river and a sablier tree. You said you could. Then we've got to hurry! We must start at once!"

I didn't know whether I wanted to start at once, but there was no holding the pro-

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fessor, and I needed the five hundred. Lord forgive me, I told him let's go; and we plugged off cross-lots through the blackest jungle on the maddest quest I ever hope to know. I carried the packs. Upchurch was loaded with manuscripts, maps, that diary page, a head-full of history topped by that ridiculous graduation hat. Off in the night somewhere the nigger drums were rattling, two policemen were hounding the bush and there was a man with a black beard, a leather bag and a rifle. Away down there on that wicked coast of Haiti—and we were racing to find a river, a sablier tree, and what had become of a man and a ship that hadn't been seen in four hundred and twenty-one years.

Now don't think I didn't smell trouble. It perfumed the air the way those fish did back on Goava beach. Haiti is no place to go blundering off half cocked with no destination in front and a history professor behind. Besides, I was thinking that a crook who'd broken Federal prison to rob a museum and come to Haiti after gold wouldn't tolerate competition from a studious savant after historical honors.

Men who see gold are pretty apt to see red at the same time. The cops had warned us to keep clear of that black-whiskered johnny, and I didn't fancy bumping across him in that jungle. There wasn't a sign of the police, either. There wasn't a sign of anything. We cut along through darkness and mosquitoes, Upchurch voicing a constant din for speed, and by morning the only signs were ones I didn't like.

Trouble with a capital T. Somehow or other I'd missed my bearings in the dark, and, instead of the valley I expected to be in, dawn found us in a region of unfamiliar gullys, swamp bottoms, jungly escarpments and forbidding *mornes,* all green and steaming like some great plate of bones-and-spinach stew. The sun rolled up in the East, red as the globe over a fire box, and when the mists cleared under the trees the sky went yellow as jaundice. I knew what that meant. This was the *avalasse* season, the time for those tropical storms that make Noah's flood look like an April shower, and the day was already spoiling for one.

THAT was something to look forward to, and by ten A.M., wandering under that red hot, yellow sky, I was fidgeting with apprehension. Upchurch fidgeted, too. That apricot-headed Harvard graduate was no tenderfoot, I soon discovered. His weedy legs refused to tire, the mosquitoes bothered his leather-bound, history-book hide no more than dew drops on a duck, and the sun couldn't get through those layers of learning on his skull. He strode at my elbow, swinging his Henry rifle, his whiskers sticking out like electricity.

"McCord, our findings will have a colossal significance, let me promise you! If I can find a trace of the Santa Maria up this south coast river I can prove Columbus died in Haiti and the greatest hoax in all history will be exposed! What a disclosure! The second Columbus a humbug! Think of it! What a dénouement on the historians! What a story—"

Did you ever see a reporter on a hot lead? Well, I'd seen the same high-powered fanatical glare in the eye of a doctor out to run down a cure for Yellow Jack, and in only one other place. In the eye of a treasure hunter sniffing lost gold.

"We must get there ahead of this criminal!" Upchurch crackled indignantly. "The meddling, cheap fool, trying to turn historical investigation into a silly treasure hunt. Anybody with an ounce of erudition realizes Columbus never found any gold here. I hope the police collar the ruffian. We must beat him to the spot, at all odds. Have we much farther to go before we find the river and the tree?"

"We'll come to the river soon," I promised. And we should have, but somehow we didn't. A mile farther on we got into a forest as hot as the private hunting preserves of the Devil, but instead of a river we were moving toward a scowling ridge of bronze cliffs I'd never seen before. There were plenty of trees that morning. Palms and bois chica trees, silk cotton

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and mahogany. Trees festooned with great blue beards of moss, and trees that stood gigantic against the sun and crashed away off on the *mornes* with a sound like cannon, breaking under the weight of the heat. And trees able to poison you to death like the deadly manzanillo. But no sablier tree.

There was water, too. Swamp pools where spiders skated and snakes snoozed. Black fever ponds where alligators dozed like diplomats at a peace conference. But no river. Those unfamiliar cliffs had me baffled, and I pumped along steaming with doubt and impatience.

Upchurch swung along fanning himself with his absurd mortar board hat, craning his neck to look around. "Do you see any river where the Santa Maria could have navigated?"

"Do you?" I snarled, beginning to miss my beauty sleep. "Besides," I invented, "if Columbus could lose himself in here and his ship never be reported, the river must be pretty well hidden—"

"Good!" the professor cheered. "And we must find it first. Carry on!"

Well, Columbus ought to have lost himself for discovering a country like that. And if he did, he wasn't the only one. By noon I was hoping to find a native who could tell me where we were, and there wasn't a black man to be seen in that whole green dish of desolation. They must have been somewhere around, judging at evidences of Haitian handiwork along the trail, such as a goat's skeleton hanging in a guava tree and a horse's skull atop a post. Voodoo totems and little *zombie* warnings to cheer the traveler on his way. But there weren't any natives. Maybe Columbus had been right and this was Japan.

I WAS supposed to be a surveyor with a sense of orientation, and I guess the compass in my head must have cracked in the heat. The sun had started down the sky when we came smack against the bronze cliffs, and I had to lean on a rock to light a cigarette and arrange a look on my face as if I knew where I was. Upchurch stopped alongside with his hands full of medieval maps (a lot of good they were when our modern maps don't mark the country) and all at once he blew my helmet off with a yell.

"Hiiii! Who's that?"

I jumped around, and my face went all out of shape. On the nearest cliff against the sky—no bigger than a saint atop a cornice of Notre Dame, but too darned big just the same—a man was standing. A stranger with a leather bag at his feet and a jet black beard on his chin and a rifle in his arm! And he was standing up there watching us with a hand shading his eyes. "It's him!" I bawled at Upchurch.

The professor was pawing the magazine of his gun. "Good heavens," he cawed at me, "we came away so fast last night I forgot the ammunition!"

"Run!" I shoved him. The man on the cliff answered with a tiny summons—"You down below! Stop!" I saw him whip up the rifle, and as I swan-dived into the bushes I heard the shot.

CHAPTER III.

THE LAST OF THE ARAWACKS!

THE shot carommed in echoes down the bronze crags, ending in a sinister drumroll on the yellow horizon; and I flopped in a thicket of wasp thorn, snatching my automatic. Then, when I got a bead on the clifftop, that sniper was gone!

"Where is he?" I snarled at Upchurch. "Where'd he go?"

The professor, dropped on all fours, was peering up the crags like a March hare. "I didn't see him go! Anyway, he's behind us, and that means we passed him last night and his stolen charts must read the same as my reckonings. It's Blackbeard heading for the lost river, all right. We've got to keep ahead of him. Do you think Columbus could have—"

"Devil take Columbus!" I exploded wrathfully. Here we were messing for a gunfight in that lost end of Haiti, the sky getting ready to storm and nothing but an automatic pistol between us, and Upchurch

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clearing his tonsils for a history lecture! And he'd forgotten to bring the ammunition! I was fit to be tied. "That fellow may try to shortcut on us and catch us in ambush. Keep your head down if you don't want it full of lead."

For answer, Upchurch barked an excited laugh. I don't suppose there was room in that fellow's brain for a bullet. That head of his was stuffed to the basting point with thoughts of his precious Columbus and the vanished Santa Maria. "We can't stand here!" he fumed. "That wretched crook is at least a mile behind. We must be near the river. Carry on!"

I carried on, bustling along through the crags, anxious to keep as many cliffs between myself and that gunman as possible. About an hour later, *bam!* A shot cracked the distances behind us, and we dropped behind rocks, cursing. That was Blackbeard's rifle, no mistake, but I burned my eyes out on the landscape and couldn't see a sign of the fellow. It's no sport being sniped at by a gunman you can't see, and the sweat watered my forehead, expecting a bullet from almost any direction. I stuck my ears out to listen and finally caught an echo in the heat waves behind us, a faint plop that might have been a lizard's cough, a falling orchid or a killer on the trail. My nerves began to twang like guitar strings.

"Where do you suppose those two policemen are?" Upchurch fretted.

I told him they were probably where the cops always are when one wants them. A little while later the professor wanted to know where we were, and I told him Egypt. It might as well have been Egypt as far as I was concerned. The cliffs were like stove lids in the waning afternoon, and we tangled through a cul-de-sac of gullys and ravines through yellow air too hot to breathe.

Every once in a while we'd stop to listen, and each time we did I was sure we heard footsteps following. It began to get in my hair. Upchurch's Columbus story took on a semblance of truth with that other fellow hot on the trail, and the more I thought of it, the less I thought of it. There's something darned uncanny about unexplored territory. Those silent crags would have had me down, without that unseen gunman bringing up the rear. And Blackbeard kept coming, that's the truth.

Well, the only thing to do was keep going, and finally we got into a ravine where there was no other choice. Sometime or other before mankind was invented, a mountain stream had chiseled a course through those dead, bronze crags. We footed along a path that zigzagged like chain lightning, where the sky was a narrow yellow ribbon overhead and the walls shot up smooth as polished obsidian and a rabbit couldn't have found a foothold for climbing. What was more, we came to a turn where rabbits would have been forced to hop single file. Scrambling through that narrow defile, we couldn't stop, climb or go back. Blackbeard was blocking the exit, and every once in a while he'd fire a couple of blasts just to let us know he was after us. That was a pretty pass, and I'm not punning, either.

THAT one-way maze was going to my head. Exhaustion can play queer tricks on your eyeballs, and I began to see Blackbeard in every rock-shadow and dust-puff. A couple of times I spun and fired at nothing, and every time I threw a bullet away, our trailing Nemesis would reply with a couple of mocking shots from Nowhere.

You can see how it was. One-way ravine, and the only thing to do was stay in the lead. I was having athlete's foot, and from the look of Professor Upchurch he was going to have a catfit, but we couldn't dilly-dally to nurse our complaints. In the end we outran the afternoon and the ravine, and another step farther we'd have outrun Life, itself. We rushed around a turn in that steep-walled defile and darted clean out into the sunset so abruptly that Upchurch fell shrieking to his face and I piled on top of him, howling like a fool and chinning myself on Infinity.

Wow! what a drop that was. Dead-end

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street and no stop sign to that dizzy chasm. A valley spread out under the sunset with all the magnitude (to my popping gaze) of the Grand Canyon of the Colorado, a straight mile to the bottom and five miles across to the mountain that hid the sun. Sweat showered off my temples and rained on a sea of tiny jungle-tops far below. We clung on that upper cliff like fledglings on the rim of an eagle's nest; took one look; threw ourselves backwards with a howl. Then I howled again, because we couldn't go backwards. That wasn't all. I snapped the magazine of my automatic to count the bullets left for Blackbeard. There weren't any!

"Keep back!" I gnashed at Upchurch. He'd crept on all fours to the edge of the abyss, and the sight of him teetering on that canyon brink pulled my hair. Unhooking the pack from my shoulders, I hurled it aside; whirled to face the bend of the ravine. Cornered rats, that's what we were; trapped in that high gully. But I wasn't going to stand against that pink wall of sunset and be shot like a peasant spy.

"Give me the rifle, quick! When Blackbeard clears the bend I'll swing for his head, and you jump for his legs—"

Upchurch didn't answer. I spun around. The ledge was empty, stark empty against space. "Professor!" I shrieked.

"Here!" I'm a liar if his voice didn't echo up over that awful rim as if he were floating in thin air. "This way! Don't be afraid!"

Afraid? My heart was making a xylophone of my ribs as I crawled out on the ledge to see where the voice was coming from. Gravity was pulling on me with eerie ropes, trying to yank me over the edge. You know that line from Kipling—"With a drop into nothing below you, as far as a beggar can spit?" When I peeked over that drop and saw Upchurch clinging on the sheer wall just under the overhang, I screeched in fear.

His face, fringed in those scholarly whiskers, looked up at me, glasses gleaming. He might have been telling me to come on in, the water's fine. "Take it easy coming over. There's a stairway cut in the rock. I'll bet it's been here for a thousand years, long before Columbus—"

"I can't," I groaned. Then, *wham!* A rifle shot smashed silence back in the ravine, and I was over. Stupid with terror I slid off the ledge, fingers clawing the rim, legs bicycling for a foothold; then my toes dug in, my hand found a niche and I was started down. Gods in heaven, what a descent that was. I can't think of that stairway down the cliff without wanting to hang on to something. I'll never know how we got down that horrible precipice. Handholds a squirrel wouldn't have dared to sit in. Footholds scooped in the living rock to make a perch for sparrows. I'd like to know the cave man who engineered that ladder down from the sky. I'd like to congratulate that forefather of the Human Fly for his nerve. Only one other head could have conceived such nerve. The apricot-colored, Columbus-stuffed head under my appalled boots.

"We're nearly down," he would caw at me. "It's only a little farther." When we had a thousand feet yet to go. Or maybe five hundred. A few hundred feet didn't matter when you hit the bottom. Head swimming, I looked down to see. I didn't do that again. Upchurch's flat hat whisked from his scalp and went sailing down and down until it was no bigger than a penny.

The breath came chugging out of me, my hands bled, my shoulders throbbed at the sockets, and Eternity dragged by as I chugged down from heaven to stand at last dizzy and sick on solid ground. His voice was almost jubilant.

"I guess we've given him the slip, all right, all right. Can you hear anything? Can you see the scoundrel up there?"

NOT me! Black spots swarmed before my eyes when I tried to get them up that wall. And twilight came swooping over the valley as we panted there, a purple rush that carried the landscape and precipice with it. The storm had pulled an extra blanket over the sky, and night tumbled down with a bang. I mean a bang!

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"He'd be a fool to come down that wall—" I started to say, and *bang!* the crack of a rifle whiplashed from invisibility, a tongue of fire made a tiny streak high in the night, the echoes clattered down like an iron safe falling down a building. Believe it or not, that human hound was quarter way down those aërial stairs already. Don't talk to me about perseverance removing mountains. I know a man who could have extinguished the Alps. Certainly he removed Upchurch and me from under that cliff. It wasn't Blackbeard's marksmanship, for a bullet couldn't have hit the broad side of a barn in that thick night. I think we fled to get away from that non-stop, terrible persistence.

The valley was Limbo and we were the lost souls, and the Devil was after us. I don't know how long we bored through the blackness before we wandered into a forest of giant mapou trees with the night lighted by a tremendous blood-orange moon that came wheeling slowly from behind the mountain to hang in the sky like a Japanese war shield, hot from a battle. Clouds were black dragons scribbled across the moon-face and a stormy and wizardish light assailed the valley, tiger-striping the thickets and illuminating the professor's apricot hair.

Whiskers askew, tattered as a Bolshevik, he moved downgrade in front of me, pawed through a wedge of brush, and stopped full tilt with a yell. "The river!"

I clawed through the thicket and found myself standing on a mud bank, wondering if we'd got across the trade winds to the Amazon. I don't know whether it was *the* river or not, but I can tell you, it was *a* river! John the Baptist or De Soto never saw a stream like the one that came suddenly out of the forest in front of us to slip around a corner in the night. That river was big. The trees on the opposite shore were dwarfed to geraniums. The channel swept by as deep and mysterious as quicksilver, and the moon had slipped down off the mountain to lie weird and stationary and watery-dim in mid flood, silent as the shine on the River of Dreams.

"Look!" Upchurch broke from a spell. "There's the sablier tree!"

Don't ask me how we could play blind man's buff at night through that haystack of a Haitian wilderness and find that needle of a sablier tree. There it was, not ten feet down the bank on the fringe of the mapous, gray and ugly and thorny as a pin cushion. No mistaking the brand—if you lean against one, you'll know. Perhaps that's why the man under this particular specimen wasn't leaning, but sitting on the roots, arms hugging his shins, all shrivelled up like those stale Inca mummies you see in the caves of Peru. Save a stale Inca mummy would have made twice the noise. That's why Upchurch didn't see it when he spied the tree. I guess he took it for part of the roots. I took it for dead. Then it lifted a chin from its kneecaps and turned its head.

"Be not afraid," it said in a basso six feet tall. "White Lords, what brings you here?"

UPCHURCH lifted his gun and whirled with a yell; but that thing under the tree opened its moon-soaked face and let loose a mummy laugh that froze the professor lock, stock and barrel. If there'd been a bullet in his rifle that burst of blind hilarity would have chased it back down the magazine. If I could have moved, that laugh would have chased me, I can tell you. Blind hilarity was the word for such a woozy guffaw. The thing let go of his shins, creaked upright like a rusty skeleton; and I saw it was blind as a mole. If the Man in the Moon is a thousand years old and hasn't had a bath or nourishment since he was three hundred, this was it!

For the first time in his life Professor Upchurch was up against a fish six times as queer as he was, and he didn't seem to relish the experience. The empty gun wobbled, lowered in his hands.

"Who are you?" he stammered. "What are you doing under this sablier tree?" The river and the tree had worked the professor into a great state, and this latest development had him hopping.

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The latest development stared at us with his sightless, cored eyes, mouth puckered in his shrunken face, and lifted a hand wrinkled as an old kid glove to give a sort of tribal salute.

"White Lords, the old one you see before you is only Guacanagari—"

"Guacanagari!" Upchurch yelled. On my word of honor, he began to shout and caper like a dose of catnip. "You hear that, McCord? This man isn't Haitian! Guacanagari is an *Indian* name! That was the name of the *cacique*—the native chief who fought against Christopher Columbus! Great Scott! this man is an Arawak—"

"Arawak," the ancient mummy nodded, as if he understood. "Guacanagari, son of the chiefs, last of the Arawak race. Welcome by Guacanagari, Guardian of the Ghosts of the River—"

"River! Sablier tree! Arawak!" Upchurch was bellowing like an idiot. And in the middle of his fresh brainstorm, the last of the Arawaks put a finger to his lips and hissed like a steam valve.

"Quiet, white Lords. We are not alone. Somebody coming—" staring upriver with an expression on his blind frontispiece as if he saw all the specters of Tophet advancing on the tide.

CHAPTER IV.

GHOSTS OF THE RIVER.

NOW I didn't like that. You bet I didn't. Something in that old mummy's voice had cooled the air to zero and the pits of his eyes, filled with moonlight, were like holes of sulphur in his head. I knew those Caribbean natives had ears like wireless, and it didn't take me long to remember we were being followed.

"Who do you hear?" I snarled, thinking of Blackbeard.

Old Man River, or whatever he was, began to strain at the silence like a medium calling your departed uncle. "Them! I hear them coming—"

"Who's them?" Upchurch cried.

I was hoping that Indian relic would say the sound waves in his wireless ears came from the boots of the Haitian *gendarme* and the freckled cop. That was where I had another think coming.

"I hear the Ghosts of the River," he chanted, pulling a basso from the voice-box in his stomach. "They are coming on their monthly cruise."

"But what are they?" the professor gargled.

"The Ghosts of the River are those condemned to sail forever on this endless waterway," the blind mummy intoned. "Each night of full moon they go by this tree, coming around the bend and going around the bend; and before they come I can tell you about them if you wish—"

Believe me, I didn't wish any such thing; but Upchurch blurted, "Tell us about them!" before I could budge a hand, and that old Shaman started his mouth going, and it was too late. It was no time to stand around with our mouths open, drinking in a ghost story, but something in that Indian's voice rooted us in our tracks. Your average Indian is about as wordy as his twin in front of a cigar store, but this fellow wasn't the ordinary five cent brand. Not by a jugful! That blind mummy was the Grand Kleagle of story tellers, and he held us like flies in the moon-spun web of his yarn. That story was right up the professor's alley, too.

Once, he told us, he was the son of the sons of kings. So many moons and tropical hurricanes ago the heavens lost count, Haiti was ruled by Arawaks like him. Their chief was the original prince of good fellows, King Guacanagari. The people were as happy as contented cows. Their bins were full and their babies fat. There was a beautiful princess.

"We've got to clear out of here," I snarled at Upchurch; and then I had to wait and hear about the princess. That mummy was pounding his forehead when he told us about her, and you couldn't walk out on his voice any more than you could have walked out on Bryan's "Cross of Gold" speech. He described the princess as a lady, a girl wonderful as a heart beat.

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Her hair was spun by the spinning wheel of the gods, her eyes were stars that mirrored the purity of her soul. She was white. Whiter than the milk of a gourd, for she wasn't any ordinary Arawak. She was a princess, and the swallows came to learn her secret of grace, and strong men fainted when they saw her figure.

Then the old story teller's voice slid another octave, and his face contorted with passion as he described two great sea birds that swam up out of one morning's sunrise to feed on the shore. These birds had wings that shut out the sun, and shiny men on their backs to fold those wings. The shiny men came ashore with signals of friendship, and King Guacanagari thought them gods and offered them the keys to the city and introduced them personally to the delicious princess.

"Upchurch," I kicked him on the shin, "we've got to go!"

"Wait!" he breathed. "Listen to this!"

WHEN the newcomers saw the princess, the mummy snarled, they didn't faint like honest Arawak men, but turned as if by magic into devils. They captured the beautiful princess and hung her with chains of iron. They dragged her aboard one of the sea birds, and told the king they would give her back to him if he gave them gold. Gold they wanted. They would torture the princess if the king did not give them gold. King Guacanagari had no gold, and the shiny devils promptly tortured the princess. They whipped her with thongs and laughed and danced around her. They despoiled her pearl-like beauty. Old Man River didn't spare us any of the details of that torturing. Rocking at the hips and flailing his leathery arms, he made us see the captive princess, made us listen to her piteous cries.

"The swine!" Upchurch cried out. "Treating a girl like that!"

Guacanagari laughed a dreadful laugh. "They were breaking her to pieces, white Lords! They did it for gold—"

The professor's face was white. "Tell me she got away from the fiends—"

That last specimen of a tribe otherwise extinct as the Dodo told us his beloved ancestral daughter did not get away. The Arawaks struck at the devils with arrow and dart, but the shiny hides of the strangers turned away arrows and they struck back with sticks that spat lightning. The island rang with the crash of knives chopping bone, and the nights were red with blood and howls and pain. Smoke blackened the sky. Instead of candy, flame came out of the sugar cane. The princess was dying of despair in the sea bird's grip, and poor King Guacanagari, his army dead, had to run for it.

"The king had no gold," the old man moaned, "and the shiny devils thought of nothing else. They poured hate and terror on the land."

Well, there are always two sides to any story, and I suppose this was the Arawak side of it. Hand to mouth it had drifted down the generations of that forgotten and beaten race to become the lay of this last minstrel, and he was singing us his tribe's valedictory in a way to make any "white Lord" lose a little ego about his forefathers. He told us how the Arawak king fled, heartbroken; how the island was burned; the Indians enslaved. He made us sweat for that suffering Indian princess.

"The king fled straight up this river," he croaked, "with one of those terrible sea birds close behind him." Then he drew a big breath to fan the fires of his imagination, and his story got mixed up with Negro folklore. He told us the king ran till he could run no more, and finally fell to his knees and turned his face to the moon and prayed help from the gods. One of the Arawak gods pitied the king anl rode down on a little black cloud.

"I cannot save your people," he sobbed to the king, "but I can make trouble for these treacherous invaders." Whereat the god snapped his fingers and all the water fell from the sky. Instantly the river coiled like a thousand snakes, banks disappeared, new banks came, there were a hundred different channels and a thousand confusing turns and a million lagoons. The

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source of the river was lost and the delta was lost. So was the demon sea bird. In this wandering labyrinth the bird swam in circles and the men who rode its back couldn't find their way.

ON and on they sailed, hunting an exit, seeking to escape. But the river wouldn't let them escape. If they turned for the coast, the river coiled backwards and held them fast. They died of hunger and despair, those shiny strangers, but they had to keep going even after they were dead. Dead men must find graves, and those dead strangers couldn't locate a cemetery.

The withered story teller shrieked his mummy laugh in conclusion. "They never escaped the river, and they never will. Their dead eyes look for a passage—can dead eyes see? Their dead hands labor to guide the sea bird's wings—can dead hands move? Their dead tongues cry out for help, but no help will come for the dead. It is the curse of the Arawak gods, white Lords, and on nights of full moon you shall see them pass. Not dead. Not alive. The strangers, the sea bird and the poor, lost princess, condemned forever to this endless tide—"

I swear the water running down the professor's cheeks seemed to turn green the roots of his beard. "The fiends!" he choked. "The dirty fiends—torturing that princess—"

"They wanted gold, white Lord!"

"They should have caught hell," Upchurch snarled. "I hope something of the sort *did* happen to them!"

"But it happened," the old man cawed balefully. "I have seen them pass many times. I know the leader of the sea bird; know his name—"

Jumping forward, Upchurch fastened a hand on the Indian's wishbone; shook him till his head rattled like a dried mango. "What's his name?"

"Don Cristoval," was the answer; and the professor went clear off the ground.

"Why, that's another name for Christopher Columbus! The Admiral used all kinds of names. Great Lord!" he whirled at me, empurpled. "This Indian's been telling us about the Spanish invasion, how the Santa Maria came up this very river and never found a passage out!" Then a quart of sweat purled down his face, and he was back at the mummy, hollering. "But that's a lie—about seeing the boat and the dead sailors and Columbus and the girl. You've found the caravel somewhere—the rest of it's a lie—"

"Of course it's a lie!" I snapped, so mad I could just about speak. I wanted to wring that spell-binder's neck for delaying us with a story that sounded true, and I could have kicked Upchurch in the pants. "How could a blind man see any such thing? It's a fairy story, you fool. There's more fables in Haiti than fleas on a dog, and—"

"But you are wrong," the mummy snored, winking the cored eyes to make them look like spiders on a coconut husk. "Don Cristoval will be on the demon water bird. So will the dead men and the beautiful princess. They are coming down-river now—"

But what came, right then, was a screech, and it didn't come from the river. Not then, it didn't. That screech sailed up from behind the sablier tree, and spun us around like tops. Grandpa Guacanagari twirled with both arms in the air. I heard a gust blow out of Upchurch as if all the helium was rushing from his brains. I looked and could have plopped. Brush crackled and a shadow fell away from the tree. I was staring at a Spanish sailor!

Do you think it was some Spanish A.B. wandering around Haiti on furlough? Some seaman from a visiting Cadiz gunboat? But the Spanish navy of today isn't worth considering, or yesterday's Spanish navy, either.

THIS Spaniard was from the day before yesterday. From just about five hundred years before! He was from so many centuries back that he'd been able to sneak up on us without noise, and only a sablier thorn in his elbow had brought him up to the present.

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You know those hats the Spanish explorers wore—those bowl-shaped steel helmets with the fin on the crown? And the cuirass, the breastplate shaped a little like a divided melon? He wore that outfit. And leg o' mutton sleeves and velvet breeches, and he carried on his shoulder a spear pointed like a fleur de lys.

The moon put a dim polish to his helmet and chest protector, and his fists on the spear were blue. I tell you, he looked so starved and skinny the shadows seemed to go right through him; his cheeks were wan, almost transparent, and there was a beard like a wisp of cobweb on his jaws. Talk about the skeleton in armor, that was it!

Old Man River didn't run because he couldn't see him, and Upchurch and I didn't run because we could. In the end it was the ghost who ran. I guess we looked pretty spectral ourselves—that Indian, the professor and me—and the Spanish mariner just stood there swallowing his Adam's apple, and then there was a flutter in the air where he'd been, and he was gone. Did you ever see terror on the face of an apparition?

If I was thinking at all, I was wondering if that Dodo Arawak had stunned us with an optical illusion, but bushes were crackling along the riverbank, and Upchurch shrieked: "It's one of the sailors!" and broad-jumped by me like a scarecrow thrown from a gun. Guacanagari the Last collapsed in the mud; I jumped his head and chased the professor's coat tails. Then we were tearing hell bent for leather along the river's edge after a shiny gleam that bobbed and ducked through the vines ahead of us. I don't know what became of the Last of the Arawaks. At the bend of the river I looked back and saw him under the sablier tree, his face soaked with moonlight, his arms wigwagging signals at the sky. No doubt the god of the Arawaks rode down on a little black cloud and took him away.

We made the bend in high gear, I remember, and I couldn't catch Upchurch and the professor couldn't catch the ghost. I don't know how long we trailed those metallic gleams. Every step of the race I was telling myself it was all in the back of my head and I was running in a colossal nightmare. Columbus, Haiti, Upchurch, Blackbeard, a sailor from Spain and a moon getting ready for a storm. If nightmares are a succession of illogical incidents strung together in a queer semblance of reason, that was it. Old Man River was something I'd eaten and the smell of jungle was the window I'd forgotten to open in my bedroom. Another minute and I'd wake up.

The trouble was, I didn't wake up. That's the fault with our brilliant modern minds, we think we're too smart for mysteries. In the old days when they didn't know the answer they called it God's handiwork. Today if we can't find a reason for something we say it must have been a dream. I've an idea both sides are wrong. One's all right until a lightning bolt hits a church and knocks a lot of innocent people dead, and education is all right until somebody like Einstein knocks your arithmetic galley west. The answer's like a card trick, so simple you can't see it. Anyway, that's the way it was that night in Nineteen Thirteen when I raced after Upchurch to catch a sailor from Fourteen Ninety Two.

THE professor's legs were going like a barber's scissors and I was running like a fool, but we weren't speedy enough to catch that frightened ghost. Somewhere in the bank of vines that Spaniard gave us the ha-ha. All at once we crashed up short on a little mud beach, our game of tag stopped by a flat, mossy rock, wall-high, that shelved out into the tide. Water swished around the promontory; its blank face sheared up to cut off a piece of the moon; landward the jungle hedged in thick; and the river's surface was bare.

Upchurch began to beat around in the bush, scything at underbrush with his empty rifle. "He got away! What became of him?"

"Stop hollering!" I hollered. "Don't forget Blackbeard's after us." My nerves were going like a fiddler's foot, and I was back to my old theory that the bag-o-bones

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Indian under the tree had mesmerized us and there'd never been a sailor in armor. But Blackbeard was a fact. "I've earned my money and I'm clearing out," I yelled.

"But the sailor—" Upchurch cawed. "Where did he go?"

"I don't care where he went. We're getting out of this. You've found your river and your tree, and—"

Upchurch skidded down the mud bank and went plowing into the river, stork-legged, to skirt the big rock. I knew the sailor hadn't gone around the rock or the water would have been roily. Upchurch didn't go around it, either. The water was up to his Phi Beta Key when he craned his neck to look around the rock and I heard him scream.

"And there's the Santa Maria! My God! It's coming around the bend!"

CHAPTER V.

H.M.S. SANTA MARIA.

MAYBE I'm not telling this the way it should be told. I know I'm not. It would take the last of the Arawaks with his sighs, groans, hobby-horse hips and Indian signs to tell it. I can only give you an idea of that creeping jungle river, that Haitian wilderness standing around in a way to curl your hair, that baited night without a leaf stirring and the queerness of moonlight slanting from that orange lantern decorated with dragon-clouds. I can only give you an idea of Professor Roy Upchurch standing belt-deep in the shallows, peeking like a scout around the tall green rock and gulping like a pelican at what he saw through his glasses. You're laughing? Well, so was I. Then I splashed out into the river to see for myself, and I didn't laugh. I had to grab that rock to keep from diving face down in the water.

The river bent sharply around a corner of the jungle, and a boat was coming around the turn. Maybe you've heard the song, "Here Comes the Show Boat!" they played a while ago on the radios around here. Well, there weren't any radios around that neck of Haiti in 1913, and it wasn't any show boat, either. Not the Mississippi River kind. And it wasn't a freighter or fishing smack or giant Cunard. A caravel was bending that turn of trees! A Spanish caravel, roundish and stumpy and galley-rigged, her hull shaped like a rind of canteloupe with rocking double towers on her stern and a single tower high on the bows and a toy brass cannon on her fo'c's'le head and a list to her starboard beam.

"Look!" Upchurch screamed in wonder.

I was looking, all right. You've seen ship models over fireplaces, little brown carvings in wood with thick, painted sails? Well, you should have been there to see the grandmother of them all make the curve of that jungle-banked river and bowl down on Upchurch and me, her hull getting bigger, her masts growing taller, sails spread and the moon for a lantern in her tops, taller and taller by the minute. No sailor hung in her ancient rigging. No lookout stood her stem to cry, "Land!" The wooden figure-head under her stumpy jib loomed at us like a guiding idol floating in mid air, and a white moustache of water parted under her nose, and she was coming fast.

"The Green Cross!" Upchurch shrieked. "The Green Cross of the Admiral painted on her mains'l! McCord, do you see it?"

You bet I could see it. Those big square sails rose up to shut out the moon as the craft rocked around the bend and came mid channel, and I couldn't tear my eyes away from the thing. She must have been driven by the current. I'm sure there was no wind in her canvas, for there wasn't a moving leaf in the jungle and not a breath of air for my pumping lungs.

"She's going to pass us!" howled Upchurch; and as for me, I wouldn't have been surprised to see the vessel take off and journey away in the sky. The two of us stood in the shallows by the rock like pop-eyed Darkies at a baptism, and the caravel came abeam with the moonlight yellow in her crosstrees. Shadows pooled on her outlandish decks. The silence of four hundred

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years pouring out of her hatchways and square, blind ports. But somewhere loose timbers whined, and I could hear the gurgle of her cutwater and, faint as a discord from a ghost's mandolin, the phantom creaking of her blocks. Word of honor, the thing was unsubstantial as a mirage; the boat was a piece of scenery, the river a fake, the moon a cheap stage-spot and the jungle colored cardboard.

I said I wouldn't have been surprised to see that vessel alter her course for the Pleiades, and instead of that she passed us mid channel, broadside, and I saw a rope dragging in her backwash as if she'd just parted her moorings and come loose. The Green Cross on her mains'l wasn't all. She shuffled by like smoke and took the next curve to give us full view of her junky, lopside stern. The moon took her full on her absurd rear end, and the letters painted on that blunt high tower were limned in brush strokes of fire. *Santa Maria!*

WATER showered in my face, and the professor's apricot head was a glassy-eyed vegetable churning out in the tide. His voice squalled back through a smother of foam—"Don't let her get away!"—and somehow I was swimming after him. I've hurried to catch more than one ship in my time, but never a ship like that one. Upchurch swam like a fool and never had a chance against my Australian crawl. Alligators to the contrary, I was going to board that boat. It's hard to tell you why. Something about saving my reason just then, if you can understand my feelings, and when the shock of a dive didn't wake me up it was worse.

Upchurch wore an expression on his face that told me he felt the same way about it. It was a darned queer expression for the face of a history professor. I guess it isn't a good thing to delve too deeply in the past. And we were delving in the past that night, don't think we weren't. Swimming down the river to catch the Santa Maria! Every time I dug my eyes out of the water I could see that historical name etched in moonlight, and it got me by the throat. I certainly thought I was mad.

To this day I don't know how I got aboard that ship. Would you know how you boarded a magic carpet? But I tore water under the shadow of her stern, thrashed alongside to starboard, got a clutch on that dragging hawser and shinnied up the slippery hull, my boots clawing for a hold on the waterlogged timbers. I think that's how it was. Anyway I dropped over the rail amidships like a half drowned rat, and a minute later Upchurch came over flipflop after me, his watery goggles shining like the rings of Saturn. Puffing and blowing like hooked fish we stood in the scuppers, staring at the high, dark aftercastle. Sails were moonlit clouds over our heads, and riverbanks went by in silence.

We held our breath and the only sound was water. Water lisping astern and pouring out of our pockets and running from the useless gun in my fist. It was too much, being aboard a ship like that. Too queer. Too everything. There wasn't anything to say.

There wasn't anything to say, and Upchurch said it, clutching the ship's rail for support and whispering as if he was afraid somebody would hear a secret. "Do you—do you realize, McCord, you are on board the Santa Maria?"

I don't know what I said.

The man's face was woozy. "That Indian told us it would come. And that sailor—trying to get back to his ship. He said—the Arawak said there would be others— Come on—"

His voice mumbled low in the tone of delirium, and before I could make up my mind about anything Upchurch charged along the rail and clattered down a wooden stairway to a well-deck below. Blood raced in my temples as I scrambled after him. You know how those ships were made in Fourteen Ninety Two. Galleries and bannister rails and verandas and a lot of carving and gingerbread. Any ship at night is mysterious enough. Try exploring the deck of a vanished Spanish caravel sailing down a tropic river four hundred years too

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late! Don't talk to me about a haunted house.

That well-deck swarmed with black shadows. The moon had decided to sink in a nest of raven-wing clouds, all but a slim slice that lingered like a heated knife suspended in the night. We clawed through all kind of queer rubbish. Barrels and tangled hawser and tackle jumped at us out of dark corners. Once I stubbed my toe on an iron deck-ring and went headlong into a mess of big tin boxes and iron rods, knotted loops of wire and something that resembled a sort of telescope. Something I thought was a big wooden funnel fell off a big box and bounced off my head. Ha ha! If I'd had the brains left to guess what it was!

"Shhhhhhh!" Upchurch whispered. "They'll hear you!"

"Who?" I blared.

He shook his head, dragging me out of the junk. "Early navigating instruments," he guessed in a shaking voice. "He did have an astronomer with him."

I wish an astronomer had been there to get a look at that historian's eyes. He'd have found a couple of new planets. I stumbled after him, and we climbed a rickety stairway two flights to the tower on the stern. Get a picture of us clambering up on that two-storied stern while the caravel waddled around another bend in the jungle. Get a picture of us clawing the tower rail of that high tilted poop, ducking through networks of rigging, jumping leap-frog over old fashioned cannon-blocks, links of chain, anvils, sea gear archaic when Drake was young. Then get a picture of a low roof set in the middle of that high deck like the glass roof of a chicken coop; Upchurch convulsed in a crouch.

A skylight! God's sake! The Admiral's cabin! *Christopher Columbus!*

And that's where I first heard the song.

A WASH of light, dim as witch-shine, flowed up from the skylight to illumine Upchurch's shocked features, and that faint tune drifted up with it. "In Fourteen Hundred Ninety Two—Away off from I-talee—" Somebody under that glass roof was humming the thing. I couldn't distinguish the words, but I caught the tune; and then I was spraddled alongside Upchurch, nose flattened on the glass. He was breathing like a broken accordion, and I guess I said something more than Christopher Columbus! A whole lot more!

I wish you could have looked down on that room the way we did. The ship's quarters of Columbus? Well, Don Cristoval hadn't stinted himself. The captain's cabin on the Aquitania would have been cell-like in comparison. Imagine a big square chamber, all mahogany and burgundy colored velvet, with a massive Gothic door to portside, and square barred windows draped with cloth of gold. Queen Isabella, herself, might have loaned the bed that loomed against one wall like a canopied catafalque.

There was a vast, carved writing desk loaded with ink pots and quill pens, and near the door a huge sea chest bound with iron and enormous hinges. The teakwood table in the center of that cabin was big enough for the signing of an international treaty; its surface was strewn with documents, manuscript, a litter of flat wooden boxes filled with something that resembled rolls of ticker tape. There was a big brass lamp in the middle—the kind they called lanthorns—square sided with a big ring in the top and candlelight peppering out of little holes.

Just the furnishing of that cabin would have sent an antiquary into spasms of astonishment, but Upchurch and I weren't window-shopping the furniture. We were watching the man at the head of the table, the man who stood there with a flagon in his fist, grinning and humming through his teeth, wagging his head to mark time.

Polkadots from the lanthorn pocked his tall forehead and spotted his long, shaved jaw. His features were handsome enough, in an oily sort of way; his straw-colored hair bobbed Dutch-fashion about the ears, and on his head a peaked hat, something like a trained nurse's, that stuck out over his ears like the roof of a birdhouse. He wore a short blue cape, tight red velvet

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sleeves, a black velveteen jacket, belted at the middle. On the breast of the jacket were five gold anchors woven in strange design. One hand clapped to his belt, the other gesturing the flagon—somewhere I'd seen that pose before. Then I remembered the painting by Sebastiano del Piombo! Only the painting shows him without a flagon in hand. The painting can't wink its eyes. The eyes of that man below us were terrible eyes. They were yellow, filmed with alcohol, and they were glaring down the table at a girl.

I guess Upchurch was getting more material for his history book than he'd counted for. The night was making magic on all twelve cylinders, now. When I saw that girl the skeleton rattled inside of me. I could have pushed my nose through the skylight. That girl was beautiful, and the desperation in her face squeezed my heart. She was white. She was snowy—veiled and gold, one hand to the ivory curve of her throat, one hand in the sunset-chrome mass of her hair, star-blue eyes fixed on those of that drunken mummer in such scorn as would have melted wax. The table was between them, that tall, bobbed-haired, humming drunkard in red and black velvet, and that pale, slim girl in white and gold. Can you see that tableau in the cabin? I wonder how many pleasure yachts sailing week-end down the Sound have witnessed such a scene? Only this was a river in dark Haiti. This was a caravel from Spain. Christopher Columbus and a princess!

"And he's drunk!" Upchurch's voice shook at my ear. "That Genoese cur! Look at him! Look at that girl! Eyes like stars, that Indian said. White as the milk of a gourd— Look!"

The Admiral was moving. Cat-foot he came around the table, and the girl slipped away to keep that table between them. She wanted to reach the door, but Columbus wasn't going to let her. I could see his mouth going, but I couldn't hear what he said. Just a blur of words, faint under the glass. When he tagged her around the table I could see his legs, spindly in purple tights.

"Damn him! Damn his eyes!" Upchurch writhed on the skylight.

THE man below us had jumped to guard the door. Now he was grinning, head lowered and wagging, liquor slopping from the flagon in his fist. He tilted his head to drink, and threads of wine coursed from the corners of his mouth. The girl was pounding the table with white fists, one shoulder exposed where her gown had been torn. We could hear her voice, low music in an undertone of fury.

"Don Carlo!" That much came clearly. "Don Carlo—"

"She's calling him by a nickname," came out of Upchurch.

The man below gave a shout of mirth and hurled the emptied flagon at the bed where it slanted from a mahogany post with a ghostly *bong!* Circling the cabin at a bound, he tried to catch the girl's arm. She slid from his fingers. Rage squalled from his mouth and the birdhouse hat slopped over one ear. Upchurch dug his nails in the chicken coop glass and screamed, "Good girl! Run!"

I don't know whether Columbus heard that shriek on the skylight or not; but I saw him make a wild fling, grab out, sprawl over the table in a grab at the girl's blowing gown. The girl's cry, "Don! Don!" pierced the skylight. The brass lamp went over. The girl slumped to the floor. The table went up in a wave of white flame.

Whoosh! There was something mighty inflammable in those little boxes that looked like ticker tape. Fire shot from one to the next in snaky loops, the papers flared yellow, the table-top roared. A spiral of fire jumped the cabin and the bed seemed to explode. The draperies went. The window curtains. A second Columbus was posed like a dummy in a furnace, screaming. Then he whirled without looking at the girl; fled to the door. The door's slam made fire jump to the skylight, and the deck where we sprawled turned rose. And the face of Professor Roy Upchurch blazed with another fire.

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"He's left her down there and she'll burn to death! The princess—"

Lashing around, he struck me hard between the eyes; snatched the gun I'd forgotten in my hand. Crash! Panes in the skylight cracked forty ways under the blow, a section fell in with a tremendous smash. Glass showered in brilliant shards. Heat slapped in an upburst of smoke. That velvet cabin was roaring like a den of lions, and I knew there wasn't a chance down there. But I didn't know Upchurch. You'll see I didn't. A streak of crimson towered out of the hole he'd smashed to scald his face, and I won't soon forget the sight of him standing over that scarlet, bellowing frame with all the fires of hell in his goggles and blood spilling down the gun-barrel from the gash in his hand. I won't ever forget the way he yelled and went down. He seemed to climb down that tower of fire. I saw him hit the table in a fountain of sparks; saw him jump.

I think Upchurch bounding around in that fire-blasting cabin was the most supernatural part of that whole supernatural night. It was two hundred and fifty in the shade down there. Upchurch didn't turn a hair in that volcano. Flames curled at him and went the other way. He jumped through a vermillion holocaust the way Moses went through the Red Sea, and with the same sort of holy glow in his eyes. Red light everywhere, but no exit. The door was a sheet of crimson. Flame made a gnashing sound, chewing the wood. If the princess wasn't a dream it was lucky she lay on the floor.

"I've got her, McCord, I've got her! I'll pass her up!" The professor's voice was a trumpet ringing above the shout of Inferno.

"Pass her up!" I screeched. I was sprawled out over the skylight like a man crawled to the edge of a hole in the ice. Only it wasn't ice. Not by the fires of Vesuvius, it wasn't! Even as I screeched for Upchurch to pass me the girl the hot glass under me burst into smithereens. Wham, crash! The whole skylight caved, and I went with it. Fire all the colors of confetti founted around me as I lit feet first on the blazing table, fell through a cloud of pistachio smoke and hit the grilled floor. I wasn't asbestos. You bet I wasn't But Upchurch of the apricot whiskers was.

I GLIMPSED him beyond the table with the girl in his arms. Smoke swam around his legs and embers showered on his hair, but he looked as cool as red ice. No resemblance then to the professor of history. No, nor anybody I'd ever seen on earth before. I think he was Thor. Thor among his lightning bolts with a goddess in his arms. Only a god could have faced flame the way Upchurch faced it.

"The door!" he squalled at me. There wasn't any door! Just a wall of flame across the cabin where the door had been. And Upchurch went straight through that wall. Chin down, he plunged across the cabin. Shielding the girl's golden head with his coat, he raced at the blaze that had been a door, burst the molten timbers with a kick and soared through. I threw an arm across my eyes. Any ordinary mortal would have been cooked like a lobster. Upchurch wasn't ordinary. He got out.

Wind gushed from the hole in the red, and the cabin was a forge. I was roasting like a chestnut, and I couldn't brave that red hole. I tried to jump through the skylight. My scalp was kindling. Tripped by a rope of smoke, I sprawled headlong. Valhalla nearly got me that time. A flag of fire bannered through the air where I'd been, and I must have scorched brown as a barbecue.

Then, wham! a waterfall dropped through the roof, and I was flat in a cataract. The volcano had turned to Niagara. Cold water smashing through smoke, hosing and spouting down billowy walls, pouring across the floor, smothering the air, turning hot red to hot black. Shoots of steam broke upward and were beaten down. A crackling and gasping as of hot iron plunged in a blacksmith's tub. The hissing of a million snakes. Suffocating gas. Lucky for me the skylight was open to the clouds. Do you know what happened? I

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can tell you about one tropical cloudburst that saved my life. I can tell you how I swam to my feet in a rainstorm, fought through a tempest of black, smoke-filled water and dived through a smoldering cabin door. I'd cursed the wet season like a lot of fools, but I took it all back that night.

The passage was hot pitch, fogged. The ship was humming and drumming like an overworked boiler, the footing under me swayed. I don't know whether it was the storm pelting her hull or the fire undermining her lower companions. All I know is I was reeling down a black corridor with my face in my hands, my lungs fighting for fresh air. All at once it flowed in my nostrils and I bumped my shins up a ladder; flopped out of an open hatch.

Rain slammed my face. Water and darkness whirled around me in cloaks. That old boat was rocking like a hammock, groaning and caterwauling with the fires in her belly and a hurricane in her sails. Her hatches glowed where the rain couldn't douse her, yellow light varnishing her wet decks. Light streamed from her fiery aftercastle, flowed through shooting rain and picked out patches of jungle on either bank. The river was running as if a dyke had broken somewhere ahead, and the burning caravel dashed along in the torrent. The banks fled astern. The channel tumbled and foamed. The cloudburst boomed; the ship yelled with her hot stomach; tackle shrieked, blocks squealed; I heard the scream of canvas ripped up the mast.

THERE was another sound, too. An undertone cannonade, low with menace and loudening by the second. We were nearing a delta, and that cannonade was a storm at sea. I lifted a yell when I heard that sound.

"Upchurch!" I bawled. "Upchurch, where—"

Then I thought I saw him. A figure was standing on the stairway to the foredeck, and I ran for the stairway screaming the professor's name. I made the foot of those stairs before I was stopped. Just as I got a boot on the bottom step a crush of flames broke from an afterhatch and the whole ship fired. Rain fell crimson, lashing the decks like a cataclysmic blood. It was queer as the devil, flame-light in that cloudburst. The man on the stairway was queerer, yet. It wasn't Upchurch. It was Christopher Columbus!

He lolled on the top step and sagged like a dummy. Legs sprawled, head wobbling, one arm hooked through the bannister rail to keep him from falling down the flight. The wet glare flickered in his face and he looked sick with drink. His jaws were slung open and his mouth was all out of shape. Rain sluiced down his forehead and spouted from the end of his nose. His eyelids were wide apart, but the pupils had got stuck in the top of his head, and his eyes were popping oysters, unwinking in the rain.

He looked down on me with those oysterish optics, and I couldn't budge. His bobbed hair hung in strings to the hinges of his mouth, and red rain slashed the anchors braided on his chest; and I couldn't budge a joint, wondering if he was alive or dead or real.

Then the caravel struck a wall of surf, and he moved. Brine fell over him in a cloud as the ship rolled over, and he took his hand from the rail and came down. Bump, bump, bump, he pitched at me, and halfway down his ankles buckled and he dived with outflung hands to grab my throat.

I hit him, too. I hit that Christopher Columbus on the button with the last living ounce of power in my body. The deck swooped up under my boots, and I caught him square on his slopping jaw with everything I had. Wok! The blow shut his mouth with a dreadful sound. He slewed like a top, and something bright fell from his unsprung fist and twinkled across the planking at my feet. I saw what it was. Upchurch's Phi Bete Key! Upchurch's little gold Phi Bete Key fell from that devil's fist, and I yelled when I saw it. Then the dummified body came crashing off the stairs and dropped face-down on my root-

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ed boots, and I saw something else. Looking down on the thing, I felt the scalp rise on my head. I think I came nearer praying at that moment than I ever did before or since.

That son of a gun Columbo! That velvet body on my boot-toes! I hadn't knocked him out, because he wasn't alive. I had slugged a dead man! The whole back of his head was smashed in!

I got my toes out from under and never stopped them going until they'd high-jumped the starboard rail and hit the river; and I didn't stop them going then. All the water in the world closed over me. But it will take more water than that to erase the indelible memory of that rotten uppercut, the picture of him flattened there without any back to his head. The day I'm laid out in lavender I'll remember him jumping down those steps at me, and I'll scare my happy mourners by sitting up in my coffin with a groan.

I swam. The Santa Maria went bowling out to sea. Making for home, I suppose. Her fevered portholes ignited the shore where the river emptied out into surf. In the havoc of storming dark she was a dwindling crimson smear. Then a spark. Then she was gone.

Sea and sky howled at her passing; and I dragged my carcass through black foam to a sandbank, and lay on my face for a long time.

CHAPTER VI.

MAKING HISTORY.

THE sun found me out. Little Caribbean zephyrs came skipping in off the blue to twist playful fingers in my hair. I sat up with a stench of burnt wood in my nostrils; stared at a blistered palm and bruise-purpled knuckles on my right hand. Then I walked across rice-white sand to put my face in a bubbling spring. The morning was cleansed in sunshine. There was the river winding cobalt from emerald jungle, and the Caribbean cool as a lake. Somewhere in palms a parrot whistled. Horizonward there wasn't a blemish on the sky. River and its jungle fringe were as good as when God made them. I might have been Robinson Crusoe.

But Crusoe didn't have swollen knuckles on his right hand. I straggled along the beach staring at my fist, and that was when I stumbled on the rest of the story. Just some bits of rubbish floating in the shallows, but I splashed out to get them, whooping hoarse yells.

A queer armful of salvage, I want to tell you. I spread the litter out to dry on the sand; got down on my hands and knees to study those bits with my mouth open. There was a folding camp chair with one leg burnt to a stump. There was that funnel-shaped thing that had bounced on my head (remember?) when I'd boarded the dark caravel and stumbled up the deck. There was a flat wooden box with the lid broken off—one of those boxes filled with stuff I'd thought was ticker tape.

I pulled the contents out of the box and watched it uncoil through my fingers in spirals and loops; and I was kneeling there pop-eyed when the morning quiet behind me was shattered by jubilant yells.

"Halloo! By heaven, it's McCord!"

I spun on my knees in time to see Upchurch step from the jungle's green with a white figure slung in his arms. He came marching at me on steady legs, and, word of honor! I wouldn't have known the man. I shouted his name, and he advanced grinning. Who wouldn't have grinned with that head of gold on his shoulders? But daylight had done something to his face. I had to squint before I saw what it was. His hair was singed black to the scalp, his beard burnt the color of coal-smoke. He was dirty as a smoked herring, but he came up grinning so fiercely his cheeks must have hurt; and I saw his glasses were gone and his eyes were like blue light.

"Professor!" I bawled. I shouldn't have recognized that face in a hundred years!

"Yeah," he nodded at the girl, gently lowering her to her feet, "this is Mr. McCord. I told you he'd turn up."

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Hand in hand they walked up to me, and maybe you can see me gawking! Beautiful was no word for that girl with her hair like a gold shawl on her shoulders and a smile to match the professor's on her lips. And Upchurch was no word for Upchurch either! You know the fool little things one says in a climax like that.

I stared at the professor. " Your beard's burnt," I said

He shook his head, chuckling. " Natural color, old man, the rain finally washed out the dye." He thrust out a hand. " You're a good scout, McCord, and I'm glad I met you. My name's Denver."

" Denver!" I dizzied at him. " Whaaat?"

" Remember?" he asked cheerfully. " The cops were after me—Frank Denver. Fella who walked out of Atlanta and robbed Columbus charts from the Washington museum."

" But, good God—"

HE stared at the rim of a charred shoe. " They were right about me headin' down here after gold. The Admiral never found any gold here in Haiti, but he came here from the Bahamas. That diary page—I picked that up in Le Cap ten years ago. Spent my stretch in prison studying medieval Italian so I could translate the thing. I told you most of it. But the last paragraph says the Santa Maria loaded gold in the Bahamas, see?" He reddened. " That's why I borrowed those ancient charts from the museum, figuring they'd help me trace the Santa Maria. That's why I played the professor act and came to Haiti, trying to locate the old caravel's hulk. I—I didn't care about history. No more than those Spanish discoverers did. I was after gold, the same way Columbus was, himself. Then—after I heard old Guacanagari's yarn—about the conquest and all—well, I felt pretty mean about gold. And when I saw history being played on that ship last night "—he smiled down at the girl—" I guess I found all the gold I'll ever want. McCord, this is Miss Carlyle. I've told her all about me, so this isn't news to her."

Haiti went merry-go-round in my vision, but I managed to mumble something to the girl and get up off my knees. Her blue eyes steadied me.

" I've thanked him, and I want to thank you for what you did last night," she said in a low voice. " That beast was drunk and —and attacking me. You see, we'd been lost up the river for days. Mr. Kline took the extras and other men downriver in the launches and they must have gone up one of those channels and lost their way. We came here for authentic atmosphere. I—I guess we got it. It was going to be a super, too." Tears glimmered on her lashes. " Yesterday afternoon all our food was gone, and we sent the Spaniard out to find water. Don said not to worry. He suggested we go over a scene; said it would take our minds off our predicament. I thought at first he was only fooling. He always overplayed. Then Don—he got out of hand. He—he—"

" He won't overplay anything again," the man beside her snapped. " I met him out on deck, up on the forward stairway. Why, he'd left you to burn alive, and then he tried to stop me. He pulled a gun and I—"

" He always tried to make love to me," the girl shuddered. " It was dreadful to—to work opposite him—"

Me? Well, I couldn't utter a syllable. I could only fix a stunned eyeball on the rubbish at my feet. What do you think that " funnel " thing was? But you've seen a megaphone. This one had white lettering on its conical side. *Triograph Company. Mr. Kline. Director.* A brass name plate on the camp chair said: *Donald de Carlo. Star. On Location.* There was a card tacked on the flat wooden box, and I read: *Serial. Episode One. Adventures of Christopher Columbus.* The ticker tape stuff in my hands was a reel of camera film!

A thousand years ago a freckled man stood in a hut door saying, " There's a party down the coast taking pictures—"

Upchurch's voice came at me through the fog, " I suppose you'll want to turn me over to the police."

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"If you do," the girl whispered, taking my hand and looking up at me, "you're not the man I think you are—"

"Nobody is," I heard myself say, thinking of film stars, gold hunters and explorers. "You'd better get rid of those whiskers before we get to Goava, Upchurch. There's a movie actor went down on a ship out here, and a fellow named Denver went with him. The police wouldn't understand."

Arm in arm we walked up the sand.

EPILOGUE

McCORD, the big engineer who had lived in Haiti longer than most of us, eased his feet with a growl. Beyond the veranda the tree frogs were chirping, the moon was down, and Port au Prince rooftops were mauve in starshine. The big man's silhouette was blue against the screen, his eyes turned seaward as if to sight a ship against the sky.

"There's a fellow out in Hollywood," he said thoughtfully, "and he's one of the few still married to his first wife. Character actor. Says he owes all his success to her. His name isn't what you might think, but you know how it is with picture folk. The movie mags like to write about him; say he's eccentric. Refuses to play in crook films and these costume shows so popular lately. I read how they wanted him to star in a big feature picture, and he turned down the part with an awful row. It was a film about Christopher Columbus—"

"Lord!" Young Harley's shadow detached itself from the shadows of the door. "Then those two police officers never took him—"

McCord's silhouette shrugged. "You know how it is with cops—always nab the wrong guy—"

"But," the young "Hasco" man blurted, "what became of the man with the black beard, then? The man who came to Goava with a leather bag and rifle, and trailed you through that jungle—who was *he?*"

"He's the wrong guy the cops nabbed," the engineer grunted, "and the day after we got to Goava they brought him in, all handcuffed up. Maybe you think that dirty little town wasn't throwing a conniption. First of all a couple of launches jammed with camera men, film extras and a hysterical fat man named Kline had drifted in out of the storm. Then Upchurch and the girl and I straggled in, more dead than alive. Next day who should show up but the freckled American cop, the Haitian *gendarme,* a scared 'Spanish sailor,' and our old friend Blackbeard, trussed up like a turkey.

"The police had caught Blackbeard on a river bank where he was trying to talk with that masquerading Spaniard. Blackbeard had handed the cops a story about being hired by a lawyer to come to Haiti and find an American who'd been left a rich estate. Said he'd trailed his party to Goava and headed into the jungle to find him.

"First thing he knew he was lost; then just by luck he sighted the party next day. He'd fired in the air to attract attention, but his party took it on the run. When Blackbeard tried to catch up with the man, he got lost again. He kept shooting and the other party kept shooting as if to signal him on the track. Finally he'd come across the Spaniard hiding in the underbrush."

McCord grinned, turning his gaze on his listeners. "You can imagine Blackbeard was sore at being arrested after all his trouble. He was mighty sore. The freckled cop didn't believe a word of his story, either, until I happened along. Then the fellow pointed at me, waved his leather bag, and let out a shriek. 'That's the man!' *Me!* I was the party he was hired to find. Me—John McCord!"

Harley gasped out, "Blackbeard was trying to find you?"

"Can you beat it?" the engineer nodded. "And it just fitted in with Upchurch's gold-hunting racket and threw the police off his trail. And all that time I'd been biting my finger nails to get out of Haiti. All that time I was combing the beach. There was this lawyer's agent after me,

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and me running like mad to get away from him, to shoot him down. That old aunt of mine in the States had died, willing me her property. There were the papers in Blackbeard's leather bag.

"I looked at him with my eyes bugging. 'You're the devil of a client,' he reproached me. 'You certainly led me a dirty chase. Your aunt left you a big estate in America, and it's all yours provided you go back there and live the rest of your life on the property.'"

"'Will I?' I roared. 'You bet I will! Where is it?'

"'Columbus,' he told me with a bow. 'Columbus, Ohio.'

"'The hell with it!' I said. And I've lived in Haiti ever since—"

THE END

An Ancient Skyscraper

TWO thousand years ago a skyscraper was built in Egypt which must have looked somewhat like ours of to-day. It was thirty stories tall. At the base it was square; farther up it became hexagonal and then round, tapering to a pedestal on which stood a statue. From a distance the building must have looked a little like the Empire State Building or the Wrigley Building in Chicago.

This was the famed Pharos at the entrance to the harbor of Alexandria. At its top glowed a beacon of charcoal, backed by a huge concave mirror which was built so as to swing and throw the beam in various directions. So powerful was this mirror that, used as a burning glass, it more than once set fire to an enemy ship—or so run the legends.

In the lower floors of the Pharos were three hundred rooms, used as quarters by the huge staff of workmen who carried wood to the beacon, climbing day and night like ants up two spiral ramps.

For centuries Oriental minarets were copied after the Pharos, which was called one of the Seven Wonders of the World. Even the island on which it stood was connected to the mainland by a remarkable highway, built for a mile on the ocean bed. At the shore end stood two giant obelisks. The people of Alexandria called them "skewers."

J. W. Holden.

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Can Jimmie Cordie and his pals outwit the powerful and mysterious Jap Military Intelligence?

"You Yankee dog! You will not escape this time"

The Assassin

By W. WIRT

LEADING UP TO THIS INSTALLMENT

COLONEL TAKARA, of the Japanese Military Intelligence, anxious to provide a reason why his country should engage in war against the United States, arranges with an American gangster and killer, Louis Chapman, to assassinate the Emperor of Manchukuo, Kang Teh, also and better known as Henry Pu-Yi. Chapman, addicted to drugs, hardly realizes what he is expected to do, and that he will be double crossed by Takara and the forces he represents.

Betty Ann Shelby, an American girl from Kentucky, who is traveling in Manchukuo, searching for Chapman, her husband, from whom she has become estranged, meets Jimmie Cordie and his comrades of fortune, George Grigsby, "Red" Dolan, the "Fighting Yid," the "Boston Bean," and the Englishman, Carewe. She tells Jimmie how she learned that her husband is to be used as the tool of Colonel Takara, and asks that he help locate Chapman to warn him, and thus avert a war between the United States and Japan. Jimmie decides to enlist the aid of Chang-lung Liang, leader of the House of Chi, who is in league with the Soviet in order to maintain the independence of his country.

Jimmie places Betty Ann under the protection of Chang-lung Liang; he and his five companions of fortune set out to find Chapman and warn him.

They meet a squadron of Japanese troops headed by Major Shiga and Major Yura, which is badly routed by the Big Swords. Shiga is wounded, and on regaining consciousness tries to kill Jimmie, but the

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"Boston Bean" shoots at his hand and knocks away the revolver. Shiga is permitted to ride away.

CHAPTER VII.

FEIGNED CAPTURE.

"WHY should I do that?" asked old Mangali Boga, Khan of the Badakshan. "You are up to some trick—as ever." Jimmie Cordie, who was sitting crosslegged on a rug in the Khan's tent, grinned cheerfully.

He and the old Khan were, if not friends, at least old acquaintances. At one time, the Badakshan Tartars had called upon the Uryankhes Tartars for help in tribal warfare. Jimmie Cordie at the time was with the Uryankhes. Together the Uryankhes and the Badakshan mopped up on the foe. Later, the Badakshan, intoxicated by success, tried out the Uryankhes, their former allies. They found out that fighting with the Uryankhes as allies was quite different from fighting against the Uryankhes.

The Uryankhes chased the Badakshan back into the hills until tired of the sport. So, Mangali Boga and Jimmie Cordie knew each other full well. They were talking in Pushtu.

"Certainly I am up to a trick," Jimmie answered, calmly. "But it is not a trick against you, mighty Khan of the peerless Badakshan."

"How do I know that?" asked the suspicious, wary old fighter. "You have nothing to swear by, being one of the English."

Mangali Boga had never heard of America or Americans but he had seen Englishmen and classed Jimmie as one.

"I don't have to do any swearing of oaths. It is simple, what I ask of you. You will take us into San-sing or Shuntien as prisoners, roped together. You will tell the men of Nippon that you captured us en route. They will ask you for us. You will refuse to give us up saying that we killed many of the Badakshan before being captured. You will keep us under guard in the heart of your encampment. We will come and go, under cover of the darkness until—"

"I will do all that? The trick, then, is against the men of Nippon. What is to prevent me taking you to them? It may be that they would pay well for Big Swords officers."

"Not a doubt in the world. They would pay you much gold. The only trouble is that Sahet Khan of the Uryankhes might not like to have his blood brother sold to the men of Nippon. I am afraid he might lose his temper, as he has done before. Of course, if you don't mind a blood feud with the Uryankhes and incidentally with the Big Swords, you can get much gold for us, as I say."

"Ho! I am not afraid of the Uryankhes or of the Big Swords either," lied Mangali Boga lustily. He was afraid of the Uryankhes and he did not want any trouble with the Manchu swordsmen of Chang-lung Liang, either.

"I know that," Jimmie also lied. "I said they might not like it."

"I would not do such a thing and you know it, Captain Cordie. I am of the blood of the Emperor of All Men, Genghis Khan."

"I also know that. It shows plainly in your face and in your bearing. All you have to do is to pay no attention to our coming and going and at last you find—we have escaped. What could be simpler and more easy to do for a friend."

"And after the trick on the little

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men of Nippon has been played, what then will they say to me who comes to them as an ally?"

"You don't know about any trick. All you know is that some prisoners you held have escaped. Are you afraid of the little men of Nippon?"

"Yes," answered Mangali Boga, frankly, "I am, while there are so many of them."

"How many men have you?"

"Ten thousand. The little men of Nippon told me to bring all I could. I am to receive so much a day for them."

"And most of them will be slain, probably all of them. Will the little men of Nippon keep on paying for them, so much a day?"

"You know better. I am also afraid of you and your tricks. I will not do what you ask."

"Would you do it if Chang-lung Liang of the House of Chi asked you to do it?"

"No."

"Would you do it if in addition to asking you he would say to you as follows, 'You, Mangali Boga, may choose the ten strongest men of your tribe and with them enter the treasure house of the House of Chi. There you and they may pick out what you desire and with it, walk unmolested away.' I know there are things there, Mangali Boga, that were once with your great ancestor Genghis Khan in Samarkand."

"How do you know?"

"I HAVE been in the treasure house and seen them. The tree made of jade, the fruit of precious stones, the birds of—"

"Let him tell me that. His word is good, that I know. With ten men I can carry away twenty times what the little men of Nippon offer me. Let him, Chang-lung Liang, tell me that and I will do whatever you say."

"Do you also know Ch'ienlung, his nephew, who some day will become the Head of the House of Chi?"

"Yes, I know him. Many times have I traded with the House of Chi before the little men of Nippon came."

"If he delivered the message to you and swore on the honor of the House of Chi that it was true word of Chang-lung Liang, would you accept it as such?"

"Yes, without question."

"He is here with me. I will call him and have him deliver the message. In turn you must swear on the Yassa of Genghis Khan that you will do as I order until I release you from further obedience." The "Yassa" is the code of laws or conduct written by Genghis Khan.

"I will swear it. Go and get Ch'ienlung."

"Wait until we get it clear. You are to take us in as prisoners—refuse to give us up. Allow us to come and go as we see fit, and when we escape, if we do, you know nothing save some prisoners escaped. Nothing the little men of Nippon say or offer makes any impression on you. We have killed Badasshan tribesmen in the hills and so, die in the hills. If the little men ask you why you did not slay us at once, say that you have sent for the relations of the dead men so that they may be present while we are being tortured."

"That is clear. What if the little men of Nippon attack me?"

"They won't, openly. They know that if they did all tribes would be afraid to join them. They may try to cut us out but I doubt it."

"That is true. I will go as far as you have said, but no further. Then, after you have escaped or been slain

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through no fault of mine, I can enter the House of Chi treasure house with ten men and carry away all we wish."

"Yes."

"Get Ch'ienlung, Captain Cordie. You have made a trade."

LIEUTENANT-GENERAL NAGAYO of the Japanese High Command had come up to Sansing from Tsitihar. He heard of what the Big Swords had done to the cavalry squadron and it had not at all improved his temper, which generally was bad.

He ordered that Major Shiga report to him, as soon as released from the hospital, and was talking to Colonel Takara when Major Shiga came in. The Major's hand was bandaged and carried in a sling. He saluted with his left hand and stood at attention.

"Tell me just what happened when the cavalry squadron commanded by Major Yura, met the Big Swords column," Nagayo rasped.

Major Shiga told him, finishing with "and when I returned to the land of the living, the squadron had been destroyed."

"I know that the squadron was destroyed. Wounded troopers have said that after you got on your feet, you—tell me in detail just what you did?"

"I saw Captain Cordie of the Big Swords and the other Yankee dogs, within a few feet of me, sitting on their horses," Shiga went on, finishing with "Captain Cordie called to me, 'Give my regard to Lieutenant-General Nagayo if you run across him. Tell him I congratulate him on his promotion,' and then—"

"Captain Cordie flirts always with death. Some day it will amount to more than a flirtation. Now he has taken it upon himself to advise us. He himself rides to a fall and soon. There is no blame attached to you, Major Shiga. You made a gallant effort to kill him and—if you had been just a little bit faster," he added, sneeringly, "you might have succeeded in doing so."

Major Shiga did not like Nagayo and never had, principally on account of Nagayo's overbearing ways. The Nagayo clan in Nippon was not nearly as important as the Shiga and Major Shiga resented the tone of Nagayo's voice.

"There was one other thing said, General," he went on, smoothly. "As you have asked me for details, I will repeat it. The one called 'Red' also called out, 'and tell the little scut that if I lay the two hands ave me on him I'll twist the scrawny neck all the way off.' Those are the exact words, General."

Lieutenant-General Nagayo, figuratively, hit the ceiling. He cursed all Americans, America, all soldiers of fortune in general and Jimmie Cordie and Red Dolan in particular. After he cooled down a little he said, "I was going back to Tokio for a visit but now, by the honor of the Nagayo clan I will stay and hunt them down. I will take one division or six if necessary and exterminate the Big Swords once for all and as I do, I will—"

A staff captain entered and saluted. "What is it?" Nagayo demanded, barely returning the salute.

"The Khan of the Badakshan goes into camp near the river, General, and with—"

"Am I to be interrupted because a hillman goes into camp? You have a strange idea of the fitness of things."

"I was about to report, General, that the Khan of the Badakshan has with him, as prisoners, several Big Swords officers."

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"What! Who are they, do you know?"

"They are the Yankees who fight for the Big Swords. Captain Cordie, the Fighting Yid, the—"

"Mangali Boga has them? You are sure, Captain Mito?"

"Yes, General, I have but just come from there. The Khan of the Badakshan has them, six of them. The ones who defended—"

"I know what they defended. Come with me, Colonel Takara—and you also Major Shiga. Mangali Boga will give or sell them to us and then we will see how much advice Captain Cordie has to offer when a rope is around his neck and—" Nagayo continued, almost to the Badakshan camp, telling what was going to happen once he had "the cursed Yankee mongrels."

On the way, Colonel Takara had a chance to say to Major Shiga, "It looks as if we must be content with the glory that is well within our grasp, Major."

"Yes, Colonel. I wish it were otherwise but—the pleasure of seeing Captain Cordie dancing on thin air will assuage my disappointment a good deal. It must be that they ran into the Badakshan after destroying the squadron."

CHAPTER VIII.

JIMMIE AND NAGAYO MEET AGAIN.

JIMMIE CORDIE, the Yid, the Bean, Red Dolan, Grigsby and Carewe sat on the ground near the center of the Badakshan camp. Their belts were empty of cartridges, their holsters empty of guns and their hands were tied behind their backs. They were sitting in a line, their backs to the side of a tent.

"What the hell now?" Red growled. "How long do we have to sit here? The scut that tied these ropes pulled them too tight. Jimmie, can't we smoke?"

"What? The bad old hillmen took everything we had off us. What do you want to do, crab the works? Be a regular prisoner, you big ape."

"Come over here und sit it by Poppa, little von," the Yid said. "Und Poppa vill sing it a nice song und put de baby to sleep."

"Oh, ye will? I dare ye to come widin reach ave the foot ave me, ye Hester Street gibbon. 'Tis Poppa who will go to sleep, ye beneath notice Yid ave the world."

"That's the boy, Red," the Bean encouraged, sleepily. "Tell him just who he is. I'm wid ye—me good man."

"And who the hell gave you a invite to—"

"Here comes—holy cats! It's our old friend Nagayo in person. Look at the grin on his face. The cat that swallowed the canary has nothing on our dear Lieutenant-General. Hivings help the poor woiking goil if old Mangali Boga don't play ball. Begin sounding off, Red, about the Badakshan, our getting captured and things in general."

"I will, Jimmie. And what the hell good was it for us to mop up on a lot of the pink toed bamalams and then—"

"Not so strong about the Japs," Jimmie warned. "They might get so mad that they'll take us whether or no."

"It as ye say, Jimmie," shouted Red. "'Tis worse than bamalams they are. What are they are all by a lot of little yellow monkeys on sticks? They can't invent nawthin—they only copy the—"

"Well, you redheaded ape. Some day I'll hang one on you for that."

Jimmie was talking in a low tone of

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voice and Red was shouting, being plainly heard by Nagayo and the other two Intelligence officers, plus several line officers who had joined the party on hearing that Big Swords officers had been captured.

"That's right, Jimmie," the Yid also shouted. "By golly gumpers, vot a true statement. Dey licked it de Russians ven de Russians didn't have it no powder und only pewter bayonets und von gun to five men. Who else did dey ever lick? De Chinks stopped it dem at Shanghai und—oi, vot have de Big Swords did to dem time und again."

"Yeah? Backing Mr. Dolan right up, aren't you, Mr. Cohen? I hope the Japs take the both of you out and—"

"Vell, vell," the Yid said, cheerfully, as Nagayo and the other Jap officers halted in front of the seated line of prisoners, "look who is here. Oi, Red, look vot de cat brought in."

All of the Japs could understand English and their little beady eyes flamed hot with wrath as more than one hand went to pistol butt.

"I don't have to look at it," snarled Red, "I can smell it. What kind of monkeys are they, Abie?"

"No, gentlemen," Nagayo said, with a laugh, "take your hands away. It is only Red Dolan and the Fighting Yid talking. Does a fast train stop to lesson a little mongrel yapping beside the tracks? We meet—"

"Who the hell do ye think ye are, ye pint sized black and white kitty?" Red interrupted. "Ye stand there grinnin' like ye amounted to something—all of ye. Wan good man could chase ye back up trees, ye—"

"That's plenty, Red. That goes for you also, Yid. I'll take it over. You were saying, General?"

Jimmie Cordie and Lieutenant General Nagayo had met several times before, when the lieutenant general was a colonel.

"I started to say, Captain Cordie, that you and I meet again. Do you think you will again escape me?"

"Well, I have before and—what is written, is written. Were you made a Lieutenant-General for your—er—recent campaign against the Big Swords?"

"I—I—you Yankee dog! You will not escape this time. Soon you will feel a rope tighten around your neck and—"

"I never have yet. Does it hurt very much?"

"Speakin' ave necks," Red put in, "did ye get the message I sent ye by the little bamalam midget standin' there as if he was a man? Listen, get the wildman to order me untied and ye can have the sword and revolver ave ye. Ye will see how it feels to have a pair ave hands around the chicken neck ave ye, me bucko giniril."

"Captain Dolan seems peeved, Captain Cordie. It may be that being finally taken by an insignificant hill tribe has shown him how truly—"

MANGALI BOGA came up. "What do you men of Nippon do here with my prisoners?" he demanded suspiciously. "Why did you not come first to me?"

"We were told that you were away, mighty Khan," answered Nagayo in Pushtu. "And so, not thinking that you would object we went to see the famous Big Swords that you, the clever one, have been able to capture where others failed."

"All of you men of Nippon speak with a smooth tongue," answered Mangali Boga scornfully. "You have seen them—now go. I will attend to them when the proper time comes."

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"We know that, ruler of the hills. Yet, it may be that—I crave the honor of an audience with you, oh Khan of the Badakshan."

"Come with me, then."

"You gentlemen return to headquarters. The Khan of the Badakshans honors me with an audience."

As Nagayo left with Mangali Boga the Bean asked Major Shiga, "How's you hand, Major?"

"My hand is getting well but I will never be able to use it again, thanks to you. You are he who is called the 'Boston Bean,' are you not?"

"Sure he is," answered the Yid, with a smirk. "Dot's him. De Bean or de Codfisher or—"

"What are ye talkin' to the little bamalam for?" Red asked, contemptuously. "Go on away from us, ye pink toed midget before I get up and blow ye away wid wan breath."

"Can you beat that, George?" Jimmie Cordie asked, wearily.

"I reckon it doesn't make much difference, Jimmie. We are gone coons, anyway. Mangali Boga intends to skin us alive up in the hills, from what I overheard. It seems we killed too many tribesmen."

"We will spare you that fate," Major Shiga said, with an evil smile on his lips. "I do not know what is meant by 'gone coons,' but you, who once were Big Swords officers, are surely—gone coons, if it means you are about to die a cur's death."

"Don't count the chickens before they're hatched, ye—I'm shut, Jimmie darlin'."

"I won't," Major Shiga returned, "although I am quite sure it is—what is the expression? Oh, yes, it is in the bag. I learned that in the land that you will never see again—and which we will soon see over our gun sights."

"Send some gentlemen over that can draw much faster than you can, Major," the Bean drawled, "otherwise—I am afraid—there will be very little sight-seeing."

"You—you—I will see to it that you are—let us go, gentlemen."

"Goodbye," called the Yid after them. "Come und see us again sometime. De latch string alvays hangs it on de outside."

The Japanese officers marched haughtily away without answering. Jimmie grinned, "Well—that's that. Now, if old Mangali Boga hangs tough, to-night we'll start looking for Mr. Chapman."

MANGALI BOGA did "hang tough," much to Nagayo's disgust. Nothing that Nagayo could offer had any effect on the old Khan. No, he would not turn over the prisoners to the Japanese. No, he would not name a price for them. No, he would not publicly execute them. They had slain Badakshan tribesmen and he had sent for the relations of the slain men to come and witness what was done to the slayers.

It was an old Badakshan custom. He would take the Big Swords to the hills, to the place they had slain the tribesmen and there make them wish a wolf had stolen them from the cradle, or words to that effect. And if the Japs bothered him he would start for the hills now and not come back. He was a friend of General Oakia and had promised that he would fight against bandits and whatnot for the Japs but by so and so, he would not wait until General Oakia came from Nippon if he could not hold a few prisoners without being asked for them.

All in all, Nagayo left the old Khan feeling as if he, Nagayo, could more

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than cheerfully wipe out all hillmen and the Badakshan tribe of hillmen first of all. He had one ray of hope and that was that General Oakia could get Mangali Boga to unbelt where he, Nagayo, could not. He did not dare force an open break with the old Khan and he knew that if the Japs tried anything else but bribery or persuasion, Mangali Boga would make the break himself. One thing he could do and that was to see to it that no Big Swords rescue column reached the prisoners.

CHAPTER IX.

INFORMATION AT A PRICE.

THAT night, the prisoners were fed, after being untied, and herded into the tent. The Badakshan tribesmen, in general, did not know what it was all about. They had seen the Big Swords ride calmly into the hill camp and a good many of them recognized Jimmie Cordie. They had seen their Khan greet him and later had seen the Manchus ride away leaving the white men. The next morning they saw the white men bound and placed on horses.

Word had been passed that they were prisoners of Mangali Boga, that they had slain Badakshan tribesmen and also that no tribesman knew anything else if questioned by the little men of Nippon. That was sufficient to close all mouths, all the tribesmen knowing what would happen to them if they disobeyed an order of old Mangali Boga.

"Well," Red announced, "here we are. Now what, Jimmie? Are we goin' to hunt for the scut?"

"We have got to do that little thing, Mr. Dolan. I'm frank to say that it does not look quite so good right here as it did up in the Big Swords camp. This darn place is full of Japs and—"

"What did you think it would be, Jeems, me good man?" asked the Bean, lazily, "full of platinum blondes?"

"Oi, dot vos a hot von, Codfisher. Sure he did. Full mit—"

"You know, George, I think it a good idea to send the Yid and the Bean out first. If they don't last more than ten minutes we'll know that something is wrong and make new plans."

"'Tis a good idea, Jimmie darlin'," Red agreed, promptly. "What the hell are they but a couple ave beneath notice ring tailed monkeys?"

"Why throw us to the lions, Jeems? Try them out with Mr. Dolan. If the Japs don't catch him, they can't catch anything."

"Let's quit fooling around for a change and get down to cases," Grigsby said. "The first act went over, Jimmie. But from what I saw on the way in—not so good. Any one of us out hunting for Chapman in this man's town has about as much chance as a lame dog in a running match."

"I've come to that conclusion myself, George. I saw heap plenty officers here that I know have fussed around with us at close quarters two or three times."

"Well, how did ye think ye was goin' to do?" demanded Red, impatiently.

"I thought that there would be more civilians here, Red, and more tribesmen who have thrown in with Misto Jap. The Badakshan seem to be the only ones around at the moment, as far as I can see. George, you and I, or Carewe and I might chief ourselves up as Badakshan tribesmen and—"

"What? How about me, ye black muzzled shrimp? Am I to be left suckin' the thumb ave me while ye—"

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"There it starts. Did we ever in our lives have to pick out who is—"

Mangali Boga came into the tent, very well pleased with himself about the way he had handled Lieutenant General Nagayo.

"I have kept my word, Captain Cordie." The little man of Nippon walked away, muttering to himself. "What now?"

"Two of us must leave the camp to-night and search for that for which we came, mighty one. We are deciding which two shall go. And also how to disguise ourselves so that we are not recognized."

"I have nothing to do with that. I will send one to you who will see to it that you clear my lines without hindrance. How you go—and when you return is not my concern. Except—if two go and do not return, what then?"

"Why—then two more will go. If they do not return, two more. If any of us are captured or slain by the little men of Nippon, you are not, as you said, concerned, Khan of the Badakshan. We all know the trick we try to play and will keep on as long as there is one of us alive. If we are all wiped out, you are released and may go to the treasure house of Chi as soon as you see fit. Until that time comes—you will continue as you are doing until you are told by any one of us that the end has come for your help. Is that plain?"

"Yes," answered the old Khan, grimly, "very plain." He turned and stalked out of the tent.

AFTER he had gone, the Yid said, "I tell you vot, Jimmie. Make it up de Irisher as a potato und ve will throw him over de—"

"For Pete's sake! Listen, you Yid chimpanzee. Disguise yourself as a clam and fool all of us. You also, Codfisher? I want to try and figure things out and I'll be darned if I can if you two are going to dribble off at the mouth all the time."

"Was I saying anything?" the Bean asked, deeply grieved.

"No, but you looked as if you might start any minute. George, I think the best thing we can do is to sleep on it. There is no use going off half-cocked. My brain seems to be made of mush at the moment."

"I say, that's a good idea, what, what, what? In the daylight many things look different, old dears, than they do at night. We may see some way to fool the jolly little blighters to-morrow that we do not see to-night."

"That's right, Carewe," Grigsby agreed. "If we can only think up some way to muzzle the Yid and the Bean so as to get some sleep."

"Why leave the redheaded mick out?" inquired the Bean. "He is the one that generally starts the argument."

"There you go starting it. Let's cut it out and get some sleep. No more wah wah, gents. Commanding officer speaking."

They did get a little sleep but not very much. The blankets tossed in by the guards posted over them by Mangali Bogo were, to put it mildly, not quite free from insect life.

The next morning, after they were fed, their hands were again tied behind their backs.

"What now?" Red snarled.

"Sit beside the tent," Jimmie answered, "we have some more visitors."

"Why can't we smoke?"

"Go ahead if you have any tobacco and can get your hands loose," Jimmie said, with a grin, as he sat down.

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"Yeah? Go ahead, banty. 'Tis daylight and everything. Go ahead and see some way to fool the bamalams. I don't want to sit here all day wid the hands ave me tied behind me back."

At that, they all laughed and Jimmie said, "Give him a few minutes, Red. In the meantime look around yourself."

"Me? What the hell do I know about it? Here we are. Is the brain ave ye still mush, Jimmie Cordie?"

"The fact that he asks you to look around, me good man, shows conclusively that it is," the Bean said.

"Is what, ye long legged beanpole from Bosting?"

"Still mush."

"What? Ye sit there and say that the brain ave Jimmie Cordie is mush, ye misbegotten cross between a telegraph pole and a jacksnipe? Who the hell are ye to—"

"Shut up, Red. Look at those Chinese peddlers over by Mangali Boga's tent. Maybeso there is a T'aip'ing among 'em. If there is we will darn soon find out where Chapman is without hunting around for him."

Jimmie Cordie got up and walked over to where the guards were sitting around a campfire.

"Is it permitted that the Chinese merchants come over and show us what they have to sell?"

A sub Khan answered, "Why not? Have you money to buy, you who led the Uryankhes with Sahet against us."

"Only to stop the Badakshan from doing what they said they would not. Go and tell the Chinese to come over here."

"Why should I? I take orders from Mangali Boga, not from you, Englishman."

"Take this order from me, mighty swordsman. And also—take this." Jimmie Cordie took from his finger a jade ring set with an emerald, given him by a Manchu noble. "Wear it and when, in the future, you need a friend, show it to me, or to any Big Swords."

"That is different," the sub Khan grunted, rising, and held out his hand for the ring. "I will bring them to you."

"One at a time," Jimmie ordered.

The first Chinese peddler was brought up. Jimmie Cordie's Chinese was more than sketchy but he did the best he could, "You know me, little brother?"

"No."

"I am the black eyed, smiling one, honorable elder brother of the all powerful Head, Yen Yuan. Now do you know me?"

"No. I know nothing of all powerful heads or of you."

"Take him back and bring me another," Jimmie said in Pushtu to the sub Khan. Another Chinese was brought and then another and another. None of them responded.

The fifth Chinese was a member of the most powerful and dreaded secret society in the Orient, the T'aip'ing. All over the world, wherever there are Chinese, there are T'aip'ing members. The society numbers over four million members and to all of them, the orders of the "Head" are obeyed to the letter. No Chinese, in their sane senses, would any more think of disobeying a T'aip'ing order or a gently voiced request, than they would of stepping with bare feet on a cobra.

The fifth Chinese answered, "Give orders, resplendent one. I have never before been dazzled by your splendor, but I have been told of the order."

"How many of the society are within call?"

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"That I do not know, Lord of the World. I know of twenty odd here and in Ksinking. Fang Wu, a war captain is in Shuntien."

"I know him. My orders are these. Go to Fang Lu. Tell him that the black eyed smiling one is here. Tell him I order a search made for a white man named Chapman who is being held in hiding by the little men of Nippon somewhere close to Shuntien. The little men are not to know that the search is being made. Fang Lu is to report to me, here."

"As you order, honorable elder brother."

"You have my permission to depart."

"DID ye find wan?" Red asked as Jimmie came back and sat down.

"I did, Mr. Dolan. Stick around a little while. We will know where Chapman is held before dark."

"Then what?"

"Why then, George and I will go and see him."

"George and you? What the hell is the matter wid me goin' wid ye?"

"It is my hunt, Red," Grigsby answered, quietly. "There are two or three questions I want to ask him regarding his treatment of a kinswoman of mine."

"In other words, Mr. Dolan," the Bean explained, "there is a Grigsby-Chapman feud on. The Dolans, not bein' feudists, are not invited."

"Listen to me. The Dolans was feudists, whatever that is, in Ireland long before there was beaneaters in Bosting and—"

"Sit over next to him and tell him all about it," Jimmie interrupted. "We'll go out as Chinks, George, with the T'aip'ing."

"What are you going to do with the rotter?" asked Carewe.

"I am going to kill him," Grigsby answered.

CHAPTER X.

SURPRISE ATTACK.

T'ANG LI, the shopkeeper, was awakened by insistent knocking at the rear door of his shop. It was about three o'clock in the morning and a heavy rain beat against the windows. T'ang Li did not intend to open his shop, which dealt in leather goods, at any such time in the night so he raised a window a little and called, "Who is there?"

"It is I, Kwang Liu. I have something with me that is very valuable that was bought from a Manchu noble. Let me in and I will sell it to you very cheap."

"You mean stolen. I know you, Kwang Liu. What is it?"

"A saddle and bridle made of the finest leather embossed with jade and gold and silver. Quick, T'ang Li. It may get wet in spite of the covering."

T'ang Li fell for it. He knew what a Manchu saddle was worth and what it would bring from any Chinese war lord or general who happened to be in funds. He knew that Kwang Liu was a bandit and he had dealt with him before but what he didn't know was that Kwang Liu, in addition to all this, was a T'aip'ing.

It had not been very difficult for the T'aip'ing to find out that a white man was living above the shop of T'ang Li. That he had arrived in a wagon and was carried into the shop, either drunk, very sick or drugged. In some way word went around among the Chinese that "the mighty society desired to

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find a foreign devil in hiding somewhere close." Word that no Japanese could hear no matter how close they were or thought they were to Chinese friends and servants.

It was a matter concerning the T'aip'ing and so, save among themselves and then only in a vague, round about way, lips were sealed. A Chinese who had come with the wagon train mentioned something, an old woman, huddled against a wall for shelter had seen something and finally Fang Lu, a war captain of the T'aip'ing had reported to Jimmie Cordie, "The one you seek is in a room above the shop of a Chinese leather merchant named T'ang Li, honorable elder brother of the all powerful Head."

That night, Jimmie and Grigsby, disguised as Chinese peddlers, in the center of several of the T'aip'ing swordsmen also posing as peddlers had left the Badakshan camp. The Japanese met on the way paid no attention to a few Chinese evidently on their way home after a hard day and evening's work trying to sell grimcracks to tribesmen.

"I will let you in. Is there anyone with you?"

"No. Hurry, T'ang Li."

The Chinese spy for the Japs opened the rear door, "Come in. I will look at the saddle in the daylight and—" Merciless hands closed around his throat, shutting off his wind before he could cry out. He was lowered to the floor and a dagger point pressed against his back. A snarled command told him not to move unless he wished to die. T'ang Li wished to live and he became like a frozen man.

Three more T'aip'ing came into the room with Jimmie Cordie and Grigsby.

"Up the stairs to the room on the left," Fang Lu directed.

The American was awake, sitting propped up with the pillows, in bed. There was a small kerosene lamp on a table near the bed which threw a little light. Chapman's face, in the light, looked gray. His eyes were dilated and his nostrils flared out. A moment before the door was opened, he had taken a "shot" of cocaine. Whatever else he was, he was no coward. There was no fear in his eyes as he glared at what to him were two Chinese.

"Get the hell out of here, you punks," he commanded. "What are you doing here?"

"Why," Jimmie Cordie answered, "a friend told us you were here and so, being Yanks, we came to call upon you."

Chapman, while Jimmie was speaking, stared at them as if not sure they were not visions conjured up by the snow in him.

"Get up out of that bed," Grigsby ordered, curtly.

Chapman knew then that the men confronting him were real. "Oh, yeah? That little louse better be careful who—"

HE meant Takara, but Grigsby thought he meant Betty Ann. Jimmie Cordie was going to try and lead Chapman on, to get the inside of what was going to happen by posing as killers looking for a job and so on. But Grigsby spoiled any chance Jimmie might have had.

"I am Elizabeth Ann Shelby's kinsman," Grigsby drawled. "Get on your feet. And after you do, reach for your gun!"

"What? Well—for the love of Mike! Kentucky stuff way over here in China. Listen, you. To hell with Elizabeth Ann Shelby and to hell with you and to hell with your buddy here.

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What do you know about that? I haven't got a rod, punk. If I had, you'd be cold meat by now."

"Let him take yours, Jimmie."

"I will not. This thing that looks like a man is some copperhead snake. No use arguing with him or anything else. The drug has got him. Kill him —or I will, in the name of all the mothers and fathers whose—"

"Go ahead," jeered Chapman. "See if I care. Come on, get it over with. Turn the heat on, Kaintuck. I ain't got a rod or nothin'."

"Get back against the wall, Jimmie," Grigsby said, quietly, "I will use my bare hands to send him to the hell he belongs in."

Jimmie Cordie looked at Grigsby, "I will execute him, George. That is what it will be, an—" he laughed. "Hop right to it, Mr. Kinsman." As he said it, he backed to the wall.

"Now, you lowdown," Grigsby ordered, "get up and learn what it means to degrade a Shelby woman."

"How about it?" demanded Chapman of Jimmie. "Do I get an even break? I'll take this big house like Grant took Richmond. How about you—after?"

"Well—if you take George Grigsby, Mr. Chapman, I will walk out of this room after tucking you back in bed."

Jimmie Cordie knew that Grigsby was just about as strong and as fast as a grizzly bear.

"Fair enough. Here I come, big feller." Chapman had once been very fast on his feet and with his hands, packing a knockout in either one of them and the snow made him think he still did.

T'ANG LI had a small Chinese servant, a boy about eleven, who slept under a bench in the kitchen. The candle that T'ang Li had lighted and carried to the door, had dropped and gone out as hands closed on his throat. The T'aip'ing had relighted it and put it on the stove which was cold. There was very little light but T'ang Li did not need light to know that the dagger point was still at his back.

Three of the T'aip'ing, swords in hand, sat down on the bench without thinking to look under it. Nothing any bigger than the half-pint sized boy could have got under it, anyway.

He had been awakened by the commotion but instead of getting out from under the bench and running, he had hugged the floor and remained where he was. After the T'aip'ing sat down, he could see, through legs, that T'ang Li was down on the floor, a dagger at his back. The boy thought that it was a case of robbers. At first he decided to remain where he was, then he became afraid that they would find him. He remembered a hole in the wall near the stove. The legs and feet shielded him a good deal and finally he eased back to the wall and along it in the shadow, as silently as a little mouse. He made it to the hole and went through it. Once out, he rose to his feet and ran to get help for T'ang Li.

There were lights in the houses along a street not far away. A street of pleasure for the Japanese soldiers. And by chance, the boy ran headlong into a party of Japanese Intelligence officers, among them Colonel Takara and Major Shiga. They had been doing a little sightseeing and were all more or less three sheets in the wind.

One of the officers promptly cuffed the boy alongside the ear, at which the boy let out a wail of woe. He began babbling about T'ang Li being robbed and daggers and men sitting on benches, all mixed up.

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Colonel Takara, as soon as he heard the name of T'ang Li, said, "Forward, gentlemen. This T'ang Li is a worthy merchant and friendly to Nippon. Take the boy under your arm, Lieutenant Kotito."

As he ran towards the house, it dawned on Takara that if the other officers went in, they might see Chapman and Chapman was very liable to say or do something that would show that he, Takara, had something to do with Chapman's being there.

As they reached the house, Takara said, "Major Shiga and I will go in. The rest of you surround the house. They will run out like rats once they see us. Shoot them down. Come, Major."

Major Shiga drew his revolver with his left hand, came to Takara's side. "It may be—"

"Guard yourselves!" shouted one of the officers, raising his revolver. "We are—" *bang-bang-bang.*

A sudden rush of swordsmen had come from the darkness. Not many swordsmen—five in all. The Jap officers opened fire instantly. Three of the swordsmen went down. The other two reached the Japs. There was a milling around, the Japs trying to avoid the swords and shoot down the Chinese. One officer seized the sword wrist of a Chinese and was shot by a brother officer who could not get his gun out of line quick enough.

"Inside, Major," shouted Takara. "There are—" three of the T'aip'ing came out the door. The fourth, Fang Lu, ran up the stairs to warn the black-eyed smiling one.

THE T'aip'ing coming out had no chance. Both Takara and Shiga stood as if at attention and opened fire. The T'aip'ing went down before they got well out of the doorway. And as they did, the two attacking the other officers went down also.

Chapman had just put his feet on the floor when the first shot came. He reached out his hand and grasped the lamp, hurling it straight at Grigsby's head. Grisby ducked and the lamp hit the wall, broke and set the room on fire. Jimmie Cordie, as the lamp hit the wall, drew his .45 Colt from a shoulder holster and fired at Chapman. But Chapman, as the lamp left his hand, was off balance. He was falling to the right as Jimmie shot. At that, Jimmie almost got him. The bullet took the tip of Chapman's left ear off.

Fang Lu came in, "The little men of Nippon, Lord," he said, calmly. "How many I do not know. Our swords hold them away but for how long I also do not know."

"Out the window," Jimmie commanded. "I guess I got him, George. No time to make sure. You first, Fang Lu."

When Colonel Takara and Major Shiga got to the room they found Chapman, bleeding from the ear, putting out the fire. They helped and between the three of them, got it out.

"Get in that closet," commanded Takara, "and stay there until I release you. Quickly, Mr. Chapman."

"Why the hell should I do that? I'm going to get me a rod and go and get that—"

"You must not be seen here. If you are—we cannot go through with our plans. Do as I ask—get in the closet. One thousand dollars more for you, if you do so at once."

"Yeah, that's different. Make it snappy, though."

Colonel Takara and Major Shiga were coming down the stairs when Jap officers crowded into the house.

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"There are none of the dogs upstairs," Colonel Takara announced. "In some way a fire started. We have put it out. How many of the mongrels were there?"

"We have accounted for eight, Colonel. Four officers are wounded."

"I will get details later. Where is T'ang Li?"

"Here, Colonel."

"Bring him forward. So you were attacked by bandits, T'ang Li?"

"Yes, mighty war lord of Nippon."

CHAPTER XI.

MAJOR SHIGA IS PERPLEXED.

IT took an hour or more to clear the house of T'ang Li of all save the Chinese leather merchant and Colonel Takara. At last, the colonel felt safe to go up and release Chapman from the closet. He did not know what had happened to Chapman. His first thought had been to see if Chapman had been killed by the robbers. The room was on fire when the two Jap officers rushed in and Colonel Takara had seen that Chapman was bleeding. But that was all he knew.

"What happened?" he demanded, as Chapman went towards a washstand.

"How the hell do I know? I was in bed and the door opened and in came those two— He'll learn me, will he? I wish that—"

"Who came in?"

"That louse named Grigsby and—"

"Grigsby? Came in here? You said two. Who was the other?"

"Some punk called Jimmie. What the hell difference does it make? I'm going to rub that guy from Kentucky out, if it takes me until the second coming." Chapman was holding a wet washrag to his ear.

"Wait a minute, Mr. Chapman. Please sit down and tell me just what happened and what was said."

"Wait till I take a shot. This damn ear hurts like hell. I'll get me a rod and start out for that—" he talked all the time he was taking a big dose of cocaine. Of what he would do to that so and so lad from Kentucky.

Finally, after the drug took hold, he calmed down and Takara got most of what had happened and been said.

"I see. Captain James Cordie and George Grigsby, Big Swords officers and now prisoners of the Badakshan. By any chance, have you told anyone of our plans?"

"No. Who the hell could I tell? I didn't even tell that little kite where I was going."

"That little kite? I do not understand, Mr. Chapman."

"Jee, you Japs are dumb. My wife."

"I am learning rapidly, Mr. Chapman. Then how—you say that—"

"Listen. My wife was a Shelby from K e n t u c k y—get that? This Grigsby is a relation of hers—get that?"

"Yes, Mr. Chapman, I get it."

"All right. Put it down in your book. In some way she must have got to him and squawked about me—how I don't know. You ever heard of Kentucky feuds?"

"Yes, Mr. Chapman. The subject interested me while I was in the States."

"Well, this punk Grigsby hears all about it and he thinks he'll feud me—get it. For what I—what was it he said? Oh, yeah, I got it, because I degraded a Shelby woman. Can you beat that? Yeah—regular Kentucky feud stuff. I'll feud him, the—. And that louse Jimmie also. He took a shot at me and if I hadn't been falling he'd have got me."

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"Then, you think that the reason they came was because of—because Grigsby was feuding you?"

"What else?"

"Your wife is still in Vladivostok?"

"How do I know? She was, when I left. She better be there, the little shreel."

"Does that also mean wife? How do you think they found out you were here?"

"Aw—how do I know? Scram out of here, will you? I want to sleep."

"I will, Mr. Chapman. I think that to-night it is best to take you to another place. In the meantime, I will see that you are not bothered with, what do you call them? Men from Kentucky who feud?"

"To hell with them. Get me a rod and let 'em all come," Chapman answered from the bed. "Beat it."

COLONEL TAKARA went to his quarters where he found Major Shiga waiting for him. He told Shiga what Chapman had told him.

"I can see how they might escape from the Badakshan but—how did they know where the American snake was hidden?" Shiga asked. "And the swordsmen who attacked us were not ordinary Chinese. Do you think it possible that they know of our plan?"

"Impossible, Major. It is as Chapman says. By some chance, simple enough if we knew, they found him. It may be that they went to T'ang Li's shop to get equipment. They did not accuse Chapman of being there to kill Henry Pu-Yi. It was only 'you die for what you have done to a Shelby woman.'"

"That is right, Colonel. Speaking of the swordsmen, one of the officers told me that he thought they were of the T'aip'ing."

"It may be that they were. Captain Cordie is very close to the T'aip'ing."

"That is news to me. I did not think that any Chinese society ever admitted—"

"I did not say that he was a member, Major Shiga. I said that he was close to them. I understand that once he saved the life of Yan Yuan's only son. Yan Yuan is the 'Head' of the T'aip'ing. Since then they have been at his beck and call. But all this is beside the issue. I take Chapman to-night to a place where all the Big Swords mongrels and the T'aip'ing cannot find him. From there he will be taken to the proper place at the proper time. Supposing you go to the Badakshan camp and see if you can find out how they escaped?"

"I will."

"On the way, arrange for cavalry detachments to comb the hills. It may be that we can pick them up although I doubt it. Captain Cordie is more than clever."

ONCE again the line of prisoners sat by the tent. Red Dolan was sounding off. "So, ye think ye missed the scut. How come ye doin' that, Jimmie? Ye never do miss and ye must have been—"

"For Pete's sake! Put a jaw tackle on, you big ape. How can I do any thinking with you wah wahin' all the time. The heck I don't miss, like everyone else. We sure gummed up the parade, George. Misto Jap knows by now that we are out after Chapman. If they have any brains at all they will hook it up and—"

"Why should they?" asked the Bean. "From what you and George said, there was no mention of anything but the fact that George was going to kill him for what he had done to a

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Shelby. I don't think they have any idea that we know about what they have framed up to do to Henry."

"Yeah? Maybeso, Codfish. What we should have done is to kill him first and talk to him afterwards. Now the Japs will be on their toes and—"

"What the hell do ye care, Jimmie Cordie? Think up something. The arms ave me are gettin' cramped."

"Do a little thinking yourself, Mr. Dolan."

"Me? Why should I, wid you here?"

"Oi, quite right, Irish bummer. Ain't dot right, Beany?"

"What? Does the likes ave ye sit there and—"

"Listen," Jimmie interrupted. "All I can say is that if you apes don't quit that, we'll sit here until the second coming if you rely on me thinking."

"It is very annoying," the Bean agreed. "The chatter of ring tailed monkeys has always given me the jitters also, Jeems. The only way to keep those so justly called apes quiet is to—"

"Here comes the jolly old Khan with—my word, it's your friend the giddy Major, Beaneater," Carewe interrupted.

"Oi, dis vill be good. I bet you his eyes pop out ven he sees Jimmie und George."

"I wonder if he is hooked up with Takara? Look at old Mangali Boga. He's thinking of the Chi treasure and—" Jimmie switched to Pushtu. "Good morning, mighty Khan of the peerless Badakshan. Have you come to inform us that we have been ransomed?"

The Yid very near called the turn about Major Shiga's eyes popping out. They were, as near as eyes can come to it and not do it. He looked at Jimmie Cordie and at Grigsby as if he did not believe they were really there.

"You see, little man of Nippon?" snarled the Khan. "I had six prisoners yesterday. Count them now. One-two-three-four-five-six. You say you heard that two escaped? Know that prisoners do not escape from the Badakshan. Truly, I am beginning to think that what I have often heard is true."

"Und vot vos it dot you heard, Mistaire—" the Yid began again in Pushtu. "What did you hear, ruler of the world?"

"You dare to speak, Yehuda?" the old Khan spat on the ground. "Silence, dog, or I will start skinning before the relations of those you slew arrive."

Red laughed, "That's tellin' the Hester Street polecat somethin', ye cockeyed old divil. That's what he is, a—"

"You also dare speak, red jackal? Know that you will soon be begging for mercy as the boiling oil creeps higher and higher up your body."

"It is ill," Jimmie Cordie said, gravely, "to revile prisoners, Khan of the Badakshan. You may some time be a prisoner yourself. Why has this little man of Nippon been brought to stare at us?"

"He came and said that he had heard that two of you had escaped. It seemed to worry him greatly, for some unknown reason."

"Escaped? Through ten thousand Badakshan? You flatter us, Major."

"But—but—you were seen. You and Grigsby."

"Some mistake, Major. I am afraid that someone is what we call kidding you."

"I—it may be, Captain Cordie. I have heard that the effect—" The major stopped talking, a puzzled look in his eyes.

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"Go ahead. The effect of what?"

Major Shiga got hold of himself. "The effect of knowing that Big Swords officers are close makes men think things."

"How's your hand?" asked the Bean conversationally.

Major Shiga stared at the Boston Bean for a moment, then answered, smoothly, "I am learning to shoot with my left, hoping against hope that you will escape from the Badakshan."

The Bean laughed, "What 'opes, Major. Tell you what? You help me get away, how's that?"

"Well," growled Mangali Boga, "you have seen them, haven't you? Count them yourself, little man. What do you want now, to stand here and talk to them all day? Truly you of Nippon are fools, all save a few."

MAJOR SHIGA would have dearly loved to tell the old Khan just where he, the Khan, stood in his estimation, but he had too much sense to do it.

"I beg your pardon, mighty leader of the Badakshan. The rumor I heard was false. If it had been true, we of Nippon were going to offer to help retake the dogs for you."

"I can both hold and retake my own prisoners," answered Mangali Boga haughtily. "Come, then."

As Major Shiga and the old Khan walked away, the Yid said, "Did you hear it dot, Jimmie? He can both hold und retake. If he can hold, he would not have to retake, ain't it?"

"I bet you," answered Jimmie, absently. "See if you can hold that trap of yours shut a few minutes, Mr. Cohen."

"Votever de Captain says," answered the Yid, sweetly. Jimmie Cordie had commanded a machine gun company in France and the Yid had been his first sergeant, incidentally that was where he got the name "The Fighting Yid" hung on him.

"He will go back and tell Takara," Jimmie thought out loud. "Takara will think one of two things. Chapman had a snow bird's dream or—old Mangali is playing with us. Then what?"

"And what the hell difference does it make what the little pink toed bamalam thinks?" demanded Red. "Why the hell don't ye think up something and go and get the cokey? Are ye goin' to let him kick the gong around and crack down on—"

"Vate—red jackal dot you are. A cokey sniffs it cocaine. Only von dot smokes it opium kicks de gong around. Come to Poppa ven you—" The Yid only got that far because Red was drawing a long breath. "So—ye know all about it, ye—ye—" Red spat in imitation of Mangali Boga. "Ye Yehuda! And a bad wan ye are. All the Cohens are Yehudas. Some ave them worse than— Jimmie, what the hell is a Yehuda?"

"What? What the heck are you talking about, Red?"

"I'm callin' the Yid a Yehuda. What is it? 'This what the old divil called him."

"My gosh! How the heck can anyone do any figuring with you around. A Yehuda is a Jew, you nitwit."

"Is that all? I thought that—"

"Supposing you and the Yid and the Bean go back of the tent. You don't seem to realize that to even attempt to do what we came here to do and get away from the Japs takes anything more than a lot of kidding. Go back of the tent and kid about the rope that is darn near your necks."

"Have I lived to see the day that

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ye, Jimmie Cordie ave the Legion, say that—"

"You have. If we—here comes Fang Lu. Come on, George and Carewe. We'll get back of the tent with him."

"Don't do 'er, Jimmie darlin'. I'm shut," Red protested.

"Und so am I, no foolink," the Yid said, hastily. He always wanted to know all about everything.

"I am deeply grieved and pained, Jeems, me good man," the Bean mourned, "that you class me with these two unspeakable morons. But as long as you do, I also am shut—no foolink."

Jimmie laughed, "I love you all—like a burglar loves a cop. Stick around—fizzledicks."

CHAPTER XII.

SECRET TUNNEL.

FANG LU did not have anything special to report. He came more to make sure that Jimmie Cordie and Grigsby were once more set in the Badakshan lines. The night, or rather the morning before, they had become separated. Jimmie ordered that all the T'aip'ing within reach were to be concentrated and that watch was to be kept on the house of T'ang Li and also that Colonel Takara and Major Shiga were to be covered. His idea was that by a sudden attack in force, Chapman could be reached, and afterwards a way cut to the hills before the Japs recovered from the surprise. Fang Lu had told him that he, Fang Lu, thought that all in all, there were some two hundred T'aip'ing within a radius of a hundred miles. Jimmie knew that the Japs would not let any small party, no matter what the party posed as, get within striking distance of Chapman again. Jimmie was sure that he had missed Chapman, the sixth sense of a marksman told him that.

Fang Lu said that it would take two or three days to get the T'aip'ing together and Jimmie, feeling that it was the only thing to do, ordered all possible haste to be made. Fang Lu agreed.

The Japs seemed to have forgotten all about the Big Swords prisoners the next few days. Red, the Bean and the Yid passed the time having regular Kilkenny cat arguments, sometimes a three cornered affair, other times two against one. Carewe, Jimmie Cordie and Grigsby talked of Big Swords affairs and of other campaigns, keeping as far away from the three arguers as possible.

The fourth morning, Fang Lu came back. The T'aip'ing, two hundred odd, were ready for the orders of the "black eyed smiling one" but—Colonel Takara and Chapman had disappeared.

"Disappeared?" Jimmie asked. "With the eyes of the T'aip'ing on them?"

"The man of Nippon was seen going into the shop of T'ang Li. The one there did not come out. Our eyes cannot see through walls, elder brother."

"That is right, little brother. And then?"

"Neither has the man of Nippon come out. Last night, one of those who watched, while the merchant and the youth were away, entered the shop. Neither the one you are after or the man of Nippon were there."

"Holy cats! A tunnel. They have taken him to another place. Well—he has got to be found, Fang Lu. Scatter the T'aip'ing out and hunt for him. Wait. To-night I go with you. My war brothers will remain here."

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There was much objection from Red when Jimmie told what he was going to do. That he was going out with the T'aip'ing and staying out until Chapman was found. Grigsby did not like it, but at last admitted that Jimmie Cordie could do no more than that, and under the circumstances it would be foolish to have two go.

"I'll attend to the feudin' for you, George," Jimmie said with a grin. "Come to think of it my great, great grandma was a Shelly. I bet you the real name was Shelby.

"You bamalams couldn't catch the measles. Stick around. Pretty soon I'll come dancing in barefooted with the bad old killer's head on a silver platter."

"Ye are more apt to be dancin' barefooted on nawthin'," answered Red, pessimistically. At which the hard-bitted, reckless adventurers all laughed.

But Jimmie Cordie did no dancing, either with a silver platter or on thin air. Search as the T'aip'ing could and did, with all their power and skill brought into play, they could find no trace either of Colonel Takara or of Chapman. Two of them got T'ang Li out in the open one night and what they did to that Chinese spy was, as the Yid would say, "plenty und den some." He admitted that there was a tunnel and that it led to a house in San-sing's business district. He also admitted that Colonel Takara and Chapman had gone down in the tunnel. Where they had gone he did not know. Finally the T'aip'ing agreed that T'ang Li did not know—which was a great relief for T'ang Li. They took him to a place where he would be incommunicado for as long as desired and told him as they left that if he opened his mouth about what had happened to him, he and his relations to the ninth degree would deeply regret his talkativeness. T'ang Li assured them, between groans, that all the Li were first cousins to the clam family.

What the T'aip'ing got out of T'ang Li did not do Jimmie Cordie any good. The trouble was that the Japs might have Chapman in San-sing, Shuntien, Hsinking or three or four other places within striking distance of the Altar or the line of march to it.

It was dangerous hunting, the slightest break meaning death for Jimmie Cordie. He was made up more than cleverly as a Chinese coolie and there were always several others that surrounded him but—the danger was there. And there was no delaying the ceremony that spelled tragedy.

TO BE CONCLUDED NEXT WEEK.

3 A—22

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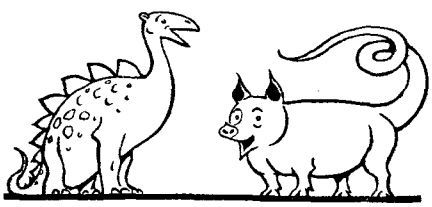
STRANGER *than* FICTION

By JOHN S. STUART

BURIED ALIVE

WHEN the abbot of a temple near Bareilly, in India, reached an age which legend puts at 157, and when he believed that his life's work was accomplished, he asked that he be buried. He lay down in a grave while faithful followers performed ancient ceremonies and covered him with earth. One of the tenets of his religion is that after usefulness has ceased, life is futile, and to live on would be an affront to the deities.



ANCIENT PIG

THE University of Michigan Museum had just put on exhibition "Merycoldodon Culbertsoni," a pig forty million years old. The pig resembles the razorback hog of Arkansas, but with a long tail. It is said to have existed in the Dakotas when the earliest mammals were dying out.

SCENTED STOCKINGS

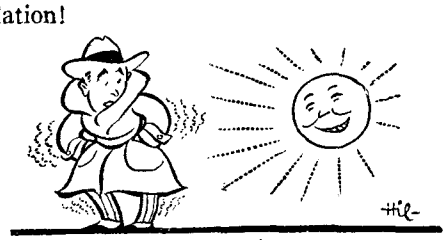
THE psychological laboratory of Colgate University has just conducted an investigation to determine whether scent influences women in buying stockings. Four pairs of stockings of identical quality were submitted to two hundred and fifty housewives. Half of the women preferred a slight narcissus scent, although no mention was made of the perfume when the opinion of the women was asked.

CHAMPION LIAR

AT the annual meeting of the Burlington Liars Club, held in Chicago recently, the medal went to Bruno Ceresa for this little gem: "My grandfather had a clock that was so old the shadow of the pendulum swinging back and forth wore a hole in the back."

BABYLONIAN BANK

THE first bank of which traces have been found was Egibi & Son. It flourished in Babylon, seven hundred years before Christ, and it maintained several branches. In Europe, the first known bank was in Venice, in the Twelfth Century. After that, banks were established in Barcelona and Stockholm. The Stockholm bank was the first to issue paper money, which was done in the year 1668. There is no record as to whether this paper money ever suffered inflation!



HEAT MAKES HIM SHIVER

GEORGE GOSNEY hates to see the thermometer climb, because it makes his legs numb, and he shivers. He suffers from inverse reactions to weather conditions. When it is zero weather he feels fine and wants to go without an overcoat. Gosney suffered a sunstroke last year, lay for weeks in a coma, and lost the sense of feeling in his left leg between the hip and the knee. Doctors can't account for his present inverse reactions.

This feature appears in ARGOSY every week

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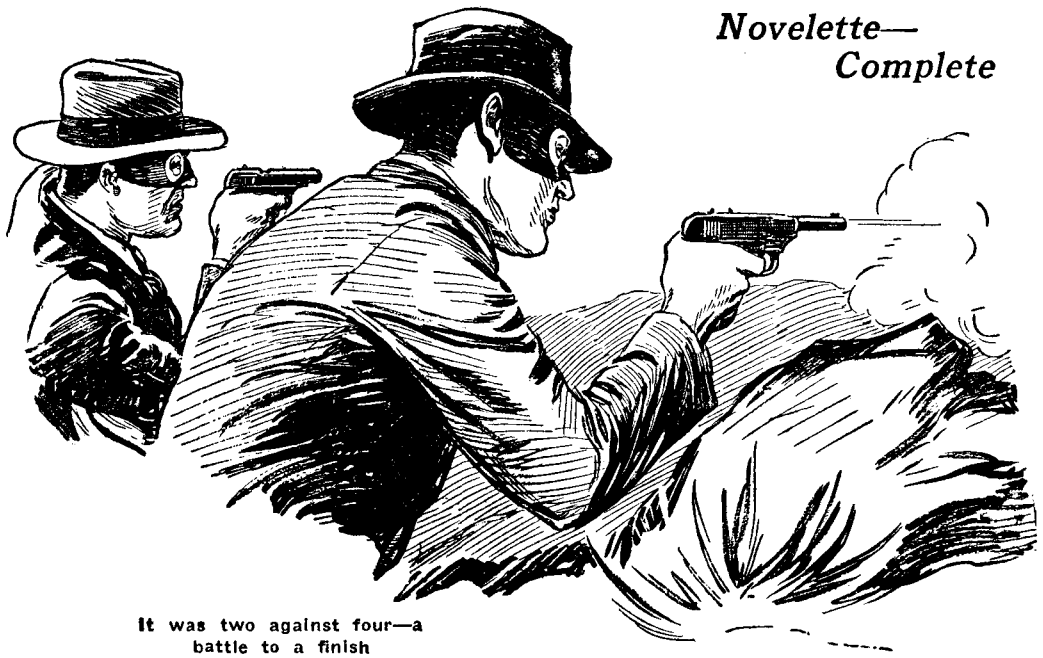
No Quarter

By ERLE STANLEY GARDNER

Author of "Sand Blast," "White Rings," etc.

Jax Bowman and Jim Grood, avengers, fight a confidence man with his own weapons

Novelette—Complete



It was two against four—a battle to a finish

CHAPTER I.

CONFIDENCE MAN.

RHODA MARCHAND, who drew a salary of three hundred dollars a month because of her extraordinary ability in clipping and classifying crime news, snipped the scissors along the edge of the newspaper column and took the article she had clipped into Jax Bowman's private office.

Jax Bowman regarded her with a slightly quizzical expression.

"Have you got something unusual, Rhoda?" he asked.

"Naturally," she told him, "or I wouldn't have come to you personally with it."

Bowman lowered his eyes to the clipping, but Rhoda Marchand didn't extend it to him at once. Her voice was rapid, nervous and high-pitched.

"You're paying me an excellent salary," she said, "to clip crime news out of newspapers. I cover newspapers of all the large cities. I classify them according to modes of operation. Whenever I find clippings that seem to indicate some gang of criminals has become too powerful for the police and is operating from city to city, using about the same methods, I call those clippings to your attention."

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Jax Bowman's voice was suddenly hard.

"And you draw," he said, "a very handsome salary, as secretarial salaries go, for your work. Do I understand that you are dissatisfied?"

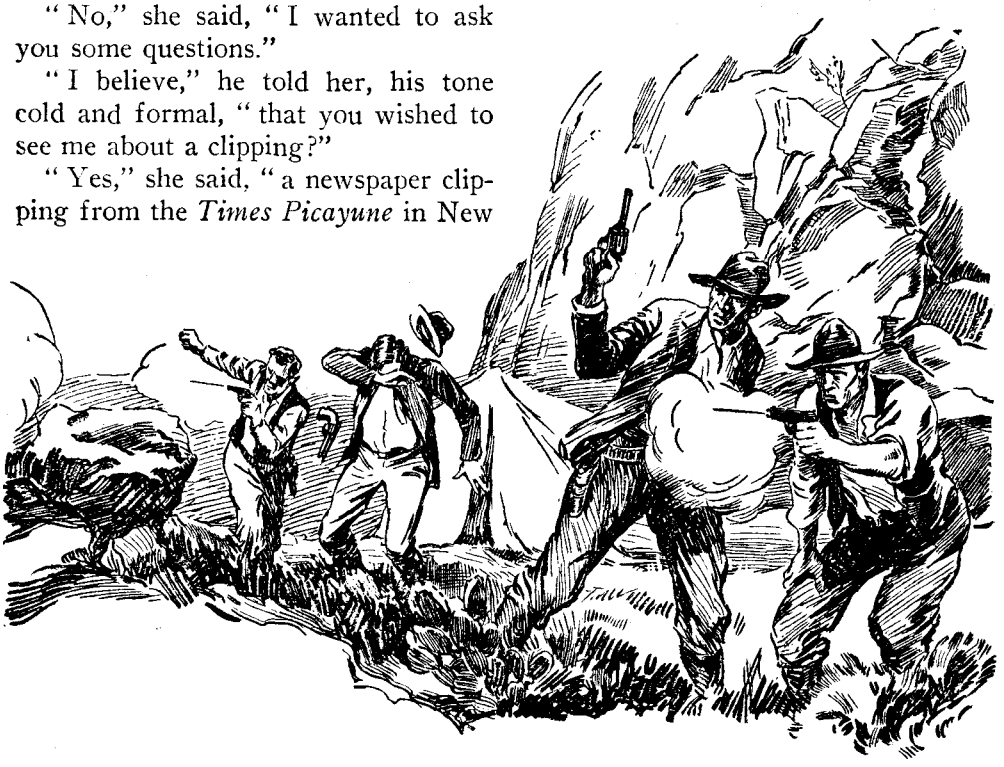
"No," she said, "I wanted to ask you some questions."

"I believe," he told her, his tone cold and formal, "that you wished to see me about a clipping?"

"Yes," she said, "a newspaper clipping from the *Times Picayune* in New Orleans. It deals with the breaking up of a criminal ring that had successfully baffled the police of San Francisco, Denver and Kansas City. The police don't know exactly how the criminal ring was broken up, but they do know that two men figured in it. Both of these men wore masks, and there were white rings around the eye-holes of the masks. A Negro servant got a glimpse of the two men."

Bowman's face was absolutely without expression. His voice said coldly, "Most interesting, Rhoda, and I presume you want to ask me about where it should be filed?"

"No, I don't," she said, "I wanted to tell you that the criminal ring that was broken up was the one concerning which I gave you clippings from the San Francisco, Denver and Kansas City newspapers."



"Yes?" said Bowman in the rising inflexion of a question.

"Yes, and immediately afterwards you and Mr. Grood left the city on an unexplained trip."

Bowman said nothing.

"It is, of course," Rhoda Marchand said, "too weirdly spectacular to warrant serious consideration—this talk of two master minds who are invading the underworld, wearing black masks with white rings around the eyes. Nevertheless, this is the fifth clipping that I've seen which has mentioned the possibility that such men are preying on the organized underworld."

"And you wish to ask me about it?"

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"I wanted to tell you," she said, "that I was saving these clippings. I also wanted to let you know that when I took this job I couldn't understand why a multi-millionaire, with the extensive business interests that you had, and the suite of offices in other buildings, should have bothered to open up this office, in which your name doesn't appear on the door. I wondered what the association between you and 'Big Jim' Grood was. It's not often that a multi-millionaire forms a business association with an ex-police officer whose sole business qualifications are those relating to the underworld."

Bowman reached in the drawer of his desk for a check-book.

"I presume that you're about to tell me," he said, "that you wish to resign, is that it?"

"No," she said, her eyes staring steadily into him, "I was about to tell you that if you ever wanted to use me for any activities outside of the office, I too could wear a mask with white rings around the eye-holes."

Jax Bowman closed the drawer. His finger-tips drummed silently upon the top of the desk.

"I think, Miss Marchand," he said, "we won't discuss the matter any further. You are giving excellent satisfaction in your present position, and your present work is comparatively safe."

"Very well," she told him, "I simply wanted you to know that it wouldn't be necessary to pull your punches, as far as I'm concerned."

Jax Bowman's face softened.

"Good girl," he said. "And would you mind asking Jim Grood to step in here for a moment, please?"

Miss Marchand got to her feet, flashed Jax Bowman a smile.

"Some day," she said, "I think you're going to need my assistance outside of the office. I think you'll need a girl who can think straight and who can shoot straight. When you do, please remember that I put in my application for the job."

Jax Bowman nodded.

"Your salary," he said, "has been raised fifty dollars a month, and I think we understand each other perfectly."

"I'll tell Mr. Grood to step in," she said, "and, thank you."

Her manner highly efficient, she closed the door of the office behind her.

Jax Bowman sat perfectly still, staring at the door through which she had disappeared. He didn't turn until the door opened, to frame the figure of Big Jim Grood.

"Rhoda told me you wanted to see me," Jim Grood said.

Jax Bowman nodded, indicated a chair.

Big Jim Grood had a cauliflower ear. The knuckles of his hands had been reinforced with bony deposits, until, when he doubled up his fist, it seemed like some ungainly battering ram. His shoulders were broad. His neck was thick. His eyes held the aggressive stare of one who has long been accustomed to putting other men on the defensive.

Jax Bowman nodded his head toward the door through which Rhoda Marchand had departed.

"She knows," he said.

Big Jim Grood stretched out his massive legs, stared at the broad-toed shoes.

"Yes," he said, "she would. She's clever, that girl. What's she going to do about it—anything?"

"She wanted to help," Bowman told him.

Grood slowly nodded and said, "Yes, she would."

Bowman fingered the clipping on his

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desk thoughtfully. He raised his eyes to regard Big Jim Grood.

Bowman was in the early thirties. His skin was bronzed from exposure to sunlight. There was a disconcerting steadiness about his eyes, a keen appraisal which seemed to strip aside all subterfuge and penetrate to the very soul. His motions were as quick and swiftly efficient as those of a bird hopping about on the ground, picking up insects. He radiated power and vitality —not the type of radiant energy that is scattered from the so-called human dynamos, but a focus power as dazzlingly concentrated as the spot of sunlight which is gathered by a big reading glass.

No one knew the extent of his fortune. Perhaps Bowman himself didn't know. His money matters were delegated to subordinates who occupied several floors in a skyscraper office building in a different part of the city.

"JIM," he said, "we've got to find that woman."

Big Jim Grood said casually, "What woman?"

His tone was just a bit too casual, his expression just a little too innocent.

Jax Bowman's keen eyes stared steadily at the face of his big confederate.

"Rita Coleman Crane," he said. "The woman who was a tool of that New Orleans gang; who thought there was a stain on her record, and who vanished into the underworld. Her connection with the affair was innocent. She risked her life, when she realized what she had been doing, to rectify the wrong she had unwittingly done."

Big Jim Grood nodded.

Jax Bowman repeated in that tone of steady insistence which secured such surprising results, and made big financial giants bow to his will with the docile obedience of servants. "We've got to find her."

Big Jim Grood stared thoughtfully at the light blue smoke which ribboned upward from the tip of his cigar.

"Did you," he asked, "ever hear of 'The Kiss and Cut Girl'?"

"Doubtless," said Jax Bowman, "Miss Marchand can tell us all we need to know about her. Who was she?"

"Her real name," Grood said, "is Evelyn Mayer. She was engaged to a man. No one knows exactly what happened on the night when the man came to her apartment to tell her something that he had tried to write and had been unable to put on paper. Some said that it was another woman who had been tricked into a fake marriage; some that it was the embezzlement of money from an old crippled woman who had given him funds to invest.

"Whatever it was, there was a quarrel, the sound of loud voices, then the thud of a blow followed by the scream of a woman.

"Those things were plainly heard by the occupants of the adjoining apartment. Two minutes later Evelyn Mayer calmly rang up police headquarters and said 'I've killed a man. Send officers to my apartment.' The officers came. They found her boy friend dead. Stabbed through the heart with a long, pointed pair of scissors. Evelyn Mayer had a black eye. There were some bruises on her body. It looked as though she had been kicked several times. She never took the witness stand, never made any explanations. The thing that was duck soup for the newspaper boys was the fact that she had kissed the man, probably as he lay dying. Lip stick was smeared over his

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dead lips. The mark of the woman's last kiss.

"The newspapers called her 'The Kiss and Cut Girl.' They always need some kind of a label for attractive women murderers."

"What about her?" asked Jax Bowman.

"Rita Coleman," Grood said, "who is now going under the name of Rita Coleman Crane, drove an automobile with too much champagne under her belt. A speeding car at an intersection crowded her to one side. She clipped the corner of a safety zone, lost control of her car and killed a child. She was wealthy. She turned part of her wealth over to the child's mother, the rest of it went to a number of children's hospitals. She served a term in the penitentiary for manslaughter. When she got out, she disappeared."

Jax Bowman's voice was impatient.

"What's the connection?" he asked.

"When I checked back on the prison records," Grood said, "I found that Rita Crane and Evelyn Mayer were in the Big House at the same time. They struck up quite a friendship. The warden remembers it well. They were both unusual women.

"Evelyn Mayer got out first. She tried to beat the game for awhile, but couldn't do it. Criminal associations dragged her down. The last I heard of her, she was tangled up with Sam Belting. They call him 'Baloney' Belting. He's got a glib tongue. He was posing as a philanthropist, who was trying to give ex-convicts a chance to go straight, when she met him. He got her pretty well tangled up in his game before she found out what it was all about; then it was too late to extricate herself. Her criminal record was against her. She played along with him."

"What," asked Bowman, "is his game?"

"Rather a peculiar one," Grood said, frowning meditatively at the end of the cigar. "He works with a gang. He always relies on a pleasing personality to lay the foundation, but he hasn't got the patience to play a regular confidence man. When he's got his victim picked, he leads them into the hands of the gang. He's a killer at heart."

"He's done time?" asked Bowman, interested.

"No. About the only persons who can testify against a confidence man are his victims. Sam Belting's victims never testify."

"Why?" asked Jax Bowman.

"For the same reason," Grood said significantly, "that a mummy doesn't sing."

JAX BOWMAN pressed a businesslike finger on a call button in the edge of his desk. Almost immediately the door to the outer office clicked open and Rhoda Marchand stood in the doorway, a figure of slim efficiency. Steady hazel eyes flashing a glance of alert inquiry.

"Look in your mode of operation file," Jax Bowman said, "and get anything dealing with bunco games worked with violence."

She frowned as though trying to recall some vague memory.

"Not very often," she said, as though thinking out loud, "do confidence men resort to violence. Not very often do stick-up men use a build-up. They're distinctive types of criminals. Let me see . . . Yes, I think I have it."

She turned abruptly. From the outer office came the sound of steel filing cabinets being opened and closed with businesslike efficiency. Ten seconds later Miss Marchand entered the office

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with a brown manila jacket which she placed on Jax Bowman's desk.

Jax Bowman glanced at the typewritten label which had been pasted on the top of the file. "Confidence games with violence."

He opened the jacket, took out some clippings which had been fastened together, turned through them with fingers that moved with the dextrous swiftness of a professional card dealer. His eyes slithered back and forth following the lines of the newspaper reports. His face settled into attentive interest.

"Not many clippings," Jim Grood said, rolling the cigar over to one corner of his mouth. "As Rhoda says, they're distinctively different crime types."

Jax Bowman's voice had the toneless quality of one who is trying to read and talk at the same time.

"A bunch of crimes centering around Southern California. Here's one about a year ago. The victim went across to Tijuana. He made a clean-up at the gambling tables at Agua Caliente, won about ten thousand dollars. He was last seen in the company of a very attractive, magnetic fellow with an iron-gray mustache. A man of about fifty-five, rather distinguished looking and well tailored. The body was found just outside of San Diego. There were two bullet holes—one in the head and one in the heart, the one in the head had been fired from the rear. There were powder burns on the back of the head. The money was gone.

"Here's another one that happened in Hollywood. This man also had been to Tijuana. He'd won quite a bunch on the races, played a ten to one shot to the tune of two thousand dollars. He was last seen in the company of a well-dressed, distinguished looking stranger —a man who was inclined to weight, a chap about fifty-five with keen gray eyes and iron-gray mustache. The hotel clerk placed him as a banker, or wealthy broker. The two went out together. The man who had picked the winner in the horse race soaked up a lot of lead without dying, until after the ambulance had reached the spot where the shooting took place. He made a dying statement. There'd been a stick-up. He thought his friend had been either killed or kidnaped. He died before he could give details. The officers never got a clue.

"Here's another winner at Agua Caliente; won fifteen thousand dollars from the gold table—that was before they clamped the lid down on gold. They had a table, you know, at which only gold coins were accepted in play, and all winnings were paid in gold. No one knows what happened to this man. He told his wife a prominent banker from the East had taken him in on the ground floor of a wonderful proposition. He went out to investigate. His body was found in the Imperial Valley —a hundred and some odd miles east of San Diego. He'd been shot once through the heart. There were powder burns on the vest."

JAX BOWMAN ceased speaking. Big Jim Grood nodded his head thoughtfully.

"That girl," he said, "is a wonder."

"What girl?" Bowman asked.

"Rhoda Marchand. She saw through the scheme where the police didn't. She filed them as 'Confidence Games with Violence.'"

"Confidence games," said Jax Bowman, in that peculiarly incisive voice of his, "with murder."

His finger pressed the button on the desk.

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JAX BOWMAN

Rhoda Marchand appeared in the doorway.

"Get us," said Bowman, "two tickets by the first plane to Agua Caliente in Mexico."

Big Jim Grood lunged to his feet, crossed to a wall safe of latest design, spun the dials of the combination, pulled the door open, took out holstered automatics with extra clips of shells; took out also two jet black masks large enough to completely cover the upper portion of a man's face. Each of these masks had eye-holes that were circled with wide rings of white.

"Those crimes," he called over his shoulder, "are the work of 'Baloney' Belting, all right."

CHAPTER II.

PLEASURE BEFORE BUSINESS.

BRIGHT sunlight beat down from a blue-black, cloudless sky. The shore line of the Pacific Ocean showed below as a shivering turquoise, separated from the shore line by a silver strand.

The big plane nosed downward. The shore line slipped away to the right. The succession of parched, brown hills stretched away to the left, until they rose abruptly into jagged, barren peaks, back of which lay desert. The sun glinted from the roofs of Tijuana.

The motors abruptly ceased their thrusting song of power. Agua Caliente showed for a moment between wing and fuselage. A magnificent array of buildings, glinting in sun-swept whites and tile reds. Jax Bowman turned to Big Jim Grood and nodded.

The two were the only passengers on the plane, and plans called for a very subtle bit of character acting, when the wheels of the plane touched the landing field.

The plane circled once, slid down on a sharp angle, a succession of jolts ran from the wheels through the wings and fuselage. The plane came to a stop. A lad in uniform opened a door. Jax Bowman and his companion stepped out into the dazzling sunlight, a sunlight so bright, an atmosphere so dry that the shadows seemed blotches of black, and the highlights as much a strain on the eye as the welding spot of an acetylene torch.

The pair were escorted to a car, and within the space of minutes, stood within the beautiful lobby at the Agua Caliente resort.

Gone was the swift purpose from the manner of Jax Bowman. Gone was the aggressive directness of Big Jim Grood. The two men looked and acted like Eastern millionaires out for a time of play, careless of expense. They made no inquiry whatever about prices, demanding only the best.

A Mexican boy showed them to their suite.

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"Now," said Jax Bowman, "we've got to be careful not to appear too prosperous or respectable. The murder of a really prominent man would be investigated. What we've got to do is to act as though we'd made a clean-up in a bucket shop, and we're spending the money on the principle of easy come, easy go."

"Okay," Jim Grood said, "let's go. A couple of drinks of this excellent port, and I'll feel a lot more like acting the part."

The big resort is planned for play on a large and luxurious scale. The two men, who had upon occasion played such grim parts in the extermination of criminal gangs, caught the spirit of the surroundings. With happy smiles twisting their lips, they flung money right and left in a mad abandon of spending.

An unobtrusive Mexican gentleman, of faultness manners, brushed against Bowman and begged his pardon with profuse courtesy. Bowman's ready friendliness matched the other's courtesy. There were a few questions and then Bowman was telling the story of his life—a life of slick promotions, quick profits, periods of hectic enjoyment, then other promotions, each promotion one of those shady affairs which left investors holding the sack.

This time he hinted, with just a suggestion of reticence, that his activities had been unusually profitable, but that narrow-minded postal authorities had threatened an investigation, and so he had decided to take a "vacation."

The courteous Mexican gentleman was very much interested, but not particularly communicative. Soon he moved away, and, within the course of minutes, the management of the hotel had a code notation upon a card describing Jax Bowman; the sky was the limit so long as he paid cash. His credit was nil.

The house detective then moved on to Big Jim Grood.

THE men enjoyed a lunch in a patio where everything was a riot of color, not the harsh colors that are hard on the eye and nerve, but a profusion of pastel shades that filled the eye with the rhythm of beauty just as the ear is filled with music. They took a siesta through the long afternoon, and by evening were ready to take a whirl at the gambling tables.

Their system was carefully agreed upon. They were, so far as possible, to keep bystanders from knowing whether they were winning or losing. They were to play after the manner of plungers, but never to be seen losing steadily. Chips were scattered over the roulette board so that it took quick mental arithmetic to tell whether the winnings exceeded the losses. They were scattered about sufficiently so that at almost every turn of the wheel there were some winnings. As soon as there were several consecutive turns of the wheel without winnings, they were to quit for a period, only to return for another whirl at the tiger after a short recess.

It was a system that worked perfectly. It is, moreover, the system used by professional gamblers who have reduced the art of chance-taking to an absolute science. "Win while you're hot, quit when you're cold. Ride your good luck to the limit. Plunge while you're winning. Make the most out of every winning streak. When you can't win, quit."

Back of every gambling device is what is known as the "hidden percentage"—a percentage which is founded

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upon psychology, rather than upon mechanics or mathematics; it is a phase of human psychology which makes it natural for a man to lose more than he wins. It is the tendency that makes a man, who is not a natural gambler, play conservatively when he is enjoying a winning streak, sends him doggedly "fighting his luck" when he runs into a losing streak.

Jax Bowman got hot.

The whirring wheel almost invariably clicked the balls into pockets which corresponded with the numbers where Jax Bowman was making his very sizable bets.

The play grew rapid. It was almost impossible for any one to estimate the exact amount of Bowman's winnings, but even a casual observer could see that they were tremendous.

The management resorted to the device of changing *croupiers,* trying to break the run of luck by shattering that mysterious something which a good gambler can feel as plainly as he can feel the surge of warmth in his veins following the first two cocktails of the evening.

Jax Bowman continued to win.

Big Jim Grood, who had not been so fortunate, ceased playing altogether in order to watch his companion. Bowman changed his chips frequently, keeping the extent of his winnings concealed, crowding his luck to the limit, his bets constantly higher, his winnings constantly greater.

There followed a lull in the winning. The crowd of hangers-on, that had pushed about the table, eager to ride on the crest of Bowman's luck by placing their own bets on the squares which he had covered, gradually started making bets elsewhere, subtle acknowledgment of the fact that the player has exhausted his winning streak. The *croupier* settled down to the welcome task of getting the chips back as Bowman's tide of fortune turned.

Bowman smiled urbanely, but his eyes were determined.

"I'm going to check out," he said.

There was the scurry of much activity. A suave manager appeared. Certainly the *señor* was not checking out from the hotel? His vacation had but just commenced. Bowman explained to him that he was not checking out of the hotel, merely temporarily cashing in his checks. The suave individual smiled courteously, assisted Bowman to transfer his checks into money.

There were various rumors circulated about the crowd as to the amount of that money. The amount did not shrink any as it passed from lip to lip in awed whispers.

THE night was still young, and Jax Bowman, flushed with the pleasure of winning, strolled to the bar, had two drinks of mellow port and then walked beamingly through the lobby of the hotel.

A dark-eyed Spanish girl managed, with an indirect approach that seemed utterly innocent, to engage Bowman in conversation.

Big Jim Grood, standing across the lobby, shook his head in silent negation in response to Bowman's unspoken inquiry.

Bowman courteously terminated the conversation.

The evening closed without further event.

The next day was a repetition of the other—a day spent in relaxation, rest, basking in the brilliant sunshine, dressing for dinner and then a sojourn at the tables.

Bowman was not lucky.

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A crowd of hangers-on watched his every play, gave muttered comments of approval when he won a bet. He was about to get hot. He was getting ready for another winning streak, and so on.

But Bowman rigidly confined his losses to two hundred and fifty dollars, made for the most part in small bets. Once or twice, when he would have a temporary winning streak, he would plunge by increasing the size of the bets, only to drop immediately to lower stakes when the winning streak failed.

When he had lost two hundred and fifty dollars he turned away from the tables.

The *croupiers* exchanged glances. This was the type of man who presented the most deadly menace to a gambling house, the man who would limit his losses to a fixed amount, but who was prepared to win everything that the bank had in sight.

Bowman strolled out into the tropical night, watched the blazing stars, the hills silhouetted against the sky. A woman's low laugh sounded at his elbow.

"Pardon the intrusion," she said, "but I take it you don't understand Spanish?"

"No," Bowman said, "I don't. Why?"

"You should have heard the conversation after you left the tables," she said. "They were laying for you tonight. The fact that you took away your winnings of last night and have managed to hang on to them is causing quite a bit of consternation."

Bowman's laugh was contagious.

"Unfortunately," he said, "I gamble to win, or, perhaps I should say, I gamble for amusement, and I cannot derive amusement from being a sucker."

They both laughed lightly.

"You," asked Bowman, "have perhaps been fortunate at the tables?"

"Not I," she said. "I'm down here with my father. He is so afraid that I'll get what he calls the 'gambling fever' that he keeps a wary and watchful eye on me. In fact, he'd probably keenly disapprove if he knew that I had started a conversation with you without the formality of a conventional introduction."

Bowman laughed again, lightheartedly.

"You mean he's rather old fashioned?" he asked.

"Only so far as his daughter is concerned," she said. "Other people's daughters he likes to see right up to the minute, but he is strong for the conventions as far as his own household is concerned. Tell me, you don't think me forward, do you?"

"I think you wonderful," he answered, bowing.

"My name," she said, "is Evelyn Brokay and I'm lonesome as the devil down here. My dad has a few cronies he enjoys, and it leaves me pretty much isolated."

Bowman gave her his name, bowed low and acknowledged his pleasure, assured her that he felt any modern young woman had a right to pick her friends, regardless of the outworn formalities of conventional introductions, particularly at resorts where the very nature of the place was such that the less desirable class was excluded.

"If," she said, "my father should catch us talking together, he'd be displeased unless he thought we were old friends. You'd forgive a white lie, wouldn't you?"

Jax Bowman laughed.

"Forgive it," he said, "I'd welcome it!"

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"I wonder," she said, "if you'd like to stroll—" She broke off with a gasp.

BOWMAN looked at her sharply. Her eyes were wide, startled, staring at a portly figure that came walking along the tiled balcony with purposeful insistence.

"That's father now," she whispered.

A masculine voice that was cold with displeasure said, "Evelyn, I thought you were in the Casino."

"I was, father," she said, "but I recognized an old acquaintance in Mr. Bowman. Permit me, father, to introduce Mr. Bowman. My father, Mr. Bowman.

"Mr. Bowman," she went on, "was on the President Hoover when I took my cruise to the Orient. It seems like old times to see him again. We were swapping reminiscences of the cruise."

The frown of austere disapproval faded from the man's face. His eyes twinkled with ready good nature. A well shaped mouth broke into an affable smile under a close-cropped iron-gray mustache. His hand shot out, gripped Bowman's hand with a cordial squeeze.

"I'm mighty glad to meet you, Mr. Bowman," he said, "very glad indeed for Evelyn's sake that she had found some friend here. I'm afraid I was a little short sighted in planning a trip down here without arranging company for her. Are you going to be here long?"

"I am leaving within a very short time," Bowman said, "although my plans are more or less indefinite. I'm on a vacation and I want to see something of the country. I thought some of going to Hollywood."

Brokay nodded, turned to Evelyn.

"Why don't you invite Mr. Bowman to spend a day or two with us in Hollywood," he said. "We'll be going back as soon as I've concluded this business deal, and you could drive him around and show him some of the sights. You might even be able to get him admitted to a studio where they were taking pictures."

She smiled at Jax Bowman.

"Oh," she said, "please come, we'd like it so much."

Bowman simulated embarrassment.

"Come on, young man," said Brokay in cordial insistence, "here in the West we don't take no for an answer when it's the question of giving hospitality. Don't be afraid we'll treat you with too much formality, because we won't. You'll just be home folks. My daughter and I live in the house with a housekeeper. I can assure you you'd be very welcome indeed."

"I have a friend with me," Bowman said lamely.

"Bring your friend, by all means," Brokay boomed. "Good heavens, man, give us a chance to show some of our Southern California hospitality. Say that you will."

The young woman squeezed his arm.

"Please," she breathed in an undertone.

"I'll make a conditional promise," Bowman said. "I will if business doesn't interfere."

"Fine," said the older man and turned away.

"Be seeing you later," he said. "I was just trying to find out where Evelyn had gone and I've got a very important conference on."

The young woman turned to Bowman as the distinguished, well tailored figure of the man with the iron-gray mustache moved through one of the light-flooded entrances to the lobby.

"Oh," she said, "what an awful mess! That's what comes of telling a white lie, but I'm afraid you've got to

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be a sport and keep up the deception. You see, my father might get very suspicious. I don't ordinarily deceive him. I don't know why I did it this time, but if he should feel you weren't an old friend—well, I'm afraid my allowance would be cut and my new motor car would go by the board."

Bowman laughed lightly.

"Well," he said, "if it's a question of helping you out by keeping up the deception, I can't imagine anything that would be more pleasant."

Her hand gave his arm a convulsive squeeze.

"Oh, you *dear!*" she exclaimed.

"That is, of course," Bowman qualified, "if business doesn't interfere."

"It won't," she said; "it can't."

And at that moment Big Jim Grood, strolling out into the night, caught sight of the girl's face where light from an open window streamed upon it, and nodded an emphatic assent.

Jax Bowman sighed.

"Well," he said, "I guess we'll have to follow the old axiom. If business interferes with pleasure, cut out the business."

CHAPTER III.

THE BAIT.

TO the casual observer, the big house was typical of the Spanish type residences occupied by the more wealthy class of Los Angeles citizens.

But Jax Bowman and his partner were not casual observers. They unhesitatingly entered into situations where dangers menaced them and where their lives would be forfeited to a single mistake. They noticed, therefore, those little things that would have been undetected by the average

BIG JIM GROOD

observer. There was no telephone connection. The iron wheels on the garage door were badly rusted. The rail on which the wheels moved was sufficiently encrusted with rust to show that the door had been closed for months. A grocery truck arriving, brought not those supplies which a housewife would order from day to day, but a complete assortment of the things required when setting up housekeeping—flour, sugar, salt, spices, dish mops, and bars of soap.

Jax Bowman, lounging on a window-seat, looked down from the window to the boxes which were being relayed on the shoulder of the delivery boy, and his alert eyes checked the various articles, which confirmed his impression that the house had been but recently leased as a furnished house.

But he said nothing.

Sam Brokay, perfect in the rôle of affable, hospitable host, kept up a running fire of conversation. His daughter, Evelyn, added her own comments from time to time, comments which invariably emphasized the intimacy

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which had existed between Bowman and herself during the cruise to the Orient.

It was evening before Bowman had a chance for a word with Big Jim Grood.

"A place," he said, "that they've rented furnished."

"Moved in some time to-day," Grood said. "They were turning on the electricity this afternoon, it wasn't on before four o'clock."

"But," asked Bowman, "is this going to help us find Rita Coleman?"

Grood shrugged his massive shoulders.

"I think it is," he said, "but in any event, we're going to go through with it. These are ruthless criminals who have escaped the police."

"Surely," Bowman insisted, "the girl can't be mixed up in all this mess of murder?"

"You mean Evelyn Brokay?" asked the ex-cop.

"Yes."

"I don't think she is," Big Jim Grood said slowly. "She knows that it isn't on the up and up. She probably figures that there's a swindle in connection with it. She's willing to go that far. I doubt very much if she'd go any farther. They use her to trap their victims; when they've done that, she's sent away on some pretext or another."

"And yet you think she's in touch with Rita Coleman?"

"Probably."

"Then when she is suddenly called away that will be the signal?"

Grood nodded.

THERE was a knock at the door.

"Who is it?" called Jax Bowman.

"Evelyn," said a feminine voice.

Big Jim Grood flung wide the door.

Evelyn Brokay's eyes met theirs with steady candor.

"I'm awfully sorry," she said, "but I've just received a telegram. A girl who went to college with me is dangerously ill. She's been hurt in an automobile accident in San Francisco. She's calling for me, and I must go at once. It's not serious; but she's upset. I can't begin to tell you how sorry I am, but you won't leave until I get back, will you?"

She turned the full force of her eyes on Jax Bowman.

"Why—er—that is—" Bowman stammered, "I hardly know what to say. I am here because of my acquaintanceship with you, and . . ."

"Oh, bosh and nonsense!" she said. "Don't be like that. We can make your visit happy and entertaining. Father is very anxious that you should stay. Much as I want to ease the mind of my sick friend, I simply can't go unless you promise to stay on with father until I get back."

Jax Bowman gave his companion a purposeful glance.

"Under those circumstances," he said, "it would seem that there's no alternative but to be selfish and do the thing that I so much want to do."

She smiled her thanks.

"I'm taking a plane in an hour," she said, and gave him her hand.

When the farewells had been said, and Grood and Jax Bowman had an opportunity to compare notes, Bowman raised his eyebrows in silent inquiry.

"It's got me," Jim Grood said. "You'd certainly think she'd have sense enough to connect what happens."

"I have a hunch," Bowman remarked slowly, "that they're going to try out some kind of a confidence game.

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If they can get our money that way, all right, if they can't, they'll try violence."

"The man's a killer," Grood remarked. "And don't ever forget that a criminal seldom changes his method of operation."

SAM BROKAY seemed in particularly high spirits.

"Wonderful day," he said. "Beautiful morning."

Bowman inspected the sun-gilded tops of the palm fronds and nodded acquiescence.

Brokay lowered his voice.

"Look here," he said, "it's none of my business, but I happened to notice that you made some rather heavy winnings there at Agua Caliente."

Bowman nodded.

"I came out pretty well," he said casually. "Oh, perhaps eight or ten thousand to the good."

"It happens," said Brokay, "that I've got a very peculiar business deal put up to me by a man in whom I have the greatest confidence. There's an opportunity for a person to invest a little capital and make a large amount of money, but it's not, strictly speaking, within the law. That is, it's not illegal, but it's a question of taking advantage of another man's ignorance. I'm frank to confess that I don't know just what to do about it."

"What is it?" Bowman inquired.

"Back in the mountainous country which borders the desert," Brokay went on, "there are some mines that are operated by individuals who go into the country and stay there for months.

"Back of Whitewater, in the desert, there's a particularly lone stretch of mountainous country known as the 'Lost Horse' territory. It's very wild, desert, mountain country. There's a prospector who's been in there for over a year and who's suddenly made a strike. He's got, perhaps, thirty thousand dollars worth of gold at the old prices. At the new prices it's worth a great deal more than that."

Bowman let his face show guarded interest.

"Go on," he said.

"This man wants to sell out his mine and the gold he's gathered. My friend, who was doing some desert explorations for the purpose of finding ancient Indian relics, happened to stumble onto him. The man thinks gold is worth the old price that it has been standardized at for so many years."

Bowman frowned thoughtfully.

"You're going to buy him out?" he asked.

Brokay's laugh was contagious.

"I'm free to confess," he said, "that I am tempted. It happens that I need to make a little easy money."

"If," Bowman said eagerly, "my friend and I could get in on the deal, we'd certainly like to ride along. We could handle up to any amount you wanted to let us in on."

"Twenty thousand?" asked Brokay.

"I think so," Bowman said, "in fact, I feel quite certain we could swing that."

"It would, of course," Brokay remarked, "have to be in cash."

"That," said Bowman, "is easy. Neither my friend nor myself put any particular trust in banking institutions."

"Well," Brokay said, "we might take a look at it. I've got a fast car that can get us up there in no time at all, and it would be a pleasant trip and it would show you some of our Southern California desert country, if nothing else."

Bowman's acquiescence was eager.

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"The trip," he said, "in itself, will be wonderful. Let's go."

CHAPTER IV.

SHOWDOWN.

THE main paved highway running from Los Angeles to Yuma climbs through the pass between San Gorgonio, on the one hand, and San Jacinto on the other. As the road gains elevation, the orange orchards change to cherry orchards, to apple orchards and then, so abruptly as to be startling to the tourist who is unfamiliar with the desert country, the character of the soil changes. There are isolated patches of sagebrush and cacti. Another two or three miles and the country is unmistakably desert. Vast, sandy, boulder-strewn stretches interspersed with varieties of sage and cacti.

Sam Brokay, at the wheel of the light, fast car, piloted it with deft skill along the pavement which stretched like a shimmering ribbon in the direct rays of the desert sun. Huge mountains rose in purple silhouettes against the blue-black of the sky. The tang of morning was still in the desert air, but there was a promise of intense heat.

"We turn off here," he said.

He slowed the car, turned to the left, started climbing over a dirt road which ran through a long, narrow cañon, climbed to a table-land, wound for miles along a barren stretch and then turned into a country that was wild, isolated and distinctive.

Great granite dikes had been flung hundreds of feet above the surface of the desert; this granite had been interspersed with veins of softer material that had decomposed when exposed to the weather, causing huge squares, thousands of tons in weight, to detach themselves from the main body of rock, to balance precariously upon a corner, or to tumble down into the desert.

Between these granite dikes were stretches of sandy desert. Joshua palms, yucca, sage, cholla cactus, prickly-pear and greasewood furnished a dense growth. The winding road twisted and turned along the base of the granite dikes, cutting through narrow defiles.

Brokay slowed the car, looked for some landmark which was so faint as to be indistinguishable to Bowman and Grood. The car turned abruptly and started fighting its way through the sandy desert.

"It's up in here a few miles," Brokay said.

The car began to heat up; twice they stopped to let the radiator cool. Mile after mile the wheels churned into the sandy labyrinth.

Big Jim Grood nudged his companion. Both men held their right hands near the lapels of their coats.

There was a faint wisp of smoke. A camp loomed suddenly against the dark trunk of a Joshua palm. A burro, standing in a dejected attitude, raised his head and aroused sufficient energy to cock one ear toward the approaching automobile. A man clad in ragged garments, with a white beard straggling down his face, sun-bleached eyes staring from under bushy eyebrows, appeared in the door of the tent. A gun was strapped about his waist. His clothes were glazed with dirt.

Brokay brought the car to a stop.

"Hello, dad," he said.

The man acknowledged the salutation.

"Whatcha doing in here?" asked Brokay.

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"Prospectin'. Whatchu doin'?"

"Came in to look for some Indian relics," Brokay said.

"Country's lousy with 'em," the old prospector remarked, giving his pants a hitch, tightening the rope that served as a belt.

"Getting anything?" asked Brokay.

"Gettin' enough to retire on," the prospector said. "I'm going to sell out soon as I can find somebody that wants to buy . . . Say, there was a fellow in here a couple of days ago that was looking for Indian relics too. The country must be getting popular. I ain't seen a human soul for nine months, and now two automobile loads come within a week."

"That's the way it goes," said Brokay, yawning. "Gosh, I envy you. I'd sure like to have a mine in here myself."

"Well, I've got one that's for sale," the prospector said.

Brokay's face lit.

"Now there," he said, "would be an idea. We could trade positions. You take our automobile and we'll take your mine."

"Heh, heh, heh!" cackled the old prospector. "You ain't seen nothing yet. I got thirty thousand dollars worth of gold."

Brokay's laugh was scornful and skeptical.

"Don't tell me," he said, "that there's any such amount of gold as that in this country."

THE prospector looked around shrewdly and suspiciously, then jerked his head toward Brokay's two companions.

"These boys all right?" he asked.

"Sure," Brokay said, "they're partners of mine. They'd come in with me on any kind of a deal I made."

"Come in here and take a look," the prospector invited.

Jax Bowman's hand was on his gun as he stooped to enter the little tent, but there was no blast of gunfire to greet him. Instead, the prospector, in utter simplicity, opened a chest and disclosed a hoard of yellow metal in the form of ingots, stacked as though they had been cord-wood.

"How'd you melt it up?" asked Brokay.

"Oh, I've got a blow-torch and a crucible. I've got lots of time and it's easier to carry that way."

"How pure is it?"

"Darn near pure. That's the way it's been running. I had some assayed. That was before I made the big strike."

"Is there much more in the mine?" asked Brokay.

The old prospector squinted his eyes.

"I'm going to be frank with you, buddy," he said. "What I struck was a pocket. There's fair wages picking around in the mine, and, of course, maybe you can strike another pocket. But I made my stake out of it and I'm going to get out. The only trouble is, I don't know how I'm going to get it out. I don't want to leave it here while I go and get a car somewhere, and there's too much to be packed on the burro. I might get it on his back, but it would bust out of anything I've got to hold it in, and then, when I hit the highway, I'd be at the mercy of all those bandits that prowl around in automobiles."

"How much is there there?"

"Oh, around thirty thousand dollars," said the prospector. "Enough to give me a good time for quite a spell."

Jax Bowman exchanged a significant glance with his companion.

"I think we'd like to come in on it with you," he said to Brokay.

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"That's fine," said the affable man with the iron-gray mustache. "It sure looks good to me. Buddy, I think you've made a deal."

Brokay pulled a well filled wallet from his pocket. His face was wreathed in an affable smile. Bowman surreptitiously opened his pocket knife, suddenly bent over the chest and drew the point of the pocket knife across one of the yellow ingots.

The gilded surface crinkled under the sharp point of the scratching knife, disclosing the glint of lead.

The face of the prospector underwent a ludicrous transformation. The affable smile vanished entirely from the face of Sam Brokay.

Jax Bowman, his hand sliding under the lapel of his coat, stared steadily at the prospector. Big Jim Grood kept his eyes glued on Brokay.

"Skin-game," said Jax Bowman.

Brokay took a deep breath.

"Well, of all the nerve," he said. "My God, I should have known better! It was the build-up that got me. It was finding this old prospector out here in the desert, and all of that stuff that goes with it."

Jax Bowman nodded.

THE prospector suddenly stepped out of character. He ran his hands over the white stubble and laughed.

"Well," he said, "I damn near put it over. I'll tell you what, you boys be sports and keep this to yourselves and I'll hook some other fellow. After all, it's a question of some one trying to skin me out of about half of my profits. I simply beat him to it."

Brokay's laugh was booming and hearty.

"Okay," he said, "no hard feelings. I guess when you come right down to it, we're as deep in the mud as he is in the mire. How about it, boys?"

Bowman nodded.

"Well," the prospector said, "you slickers might just as well stick around for a while. I've been in here for more than two weeks on the build-up and growing this crop of stubble. My partner is out drumming me up suckers. I'm so damn lonesome for companionship I go out and talk to the burro. Stick around and I'll cook you up some desert chow."

"Are there," asked Bowman, "any prehistoric relics around here?"

"Lots of them," the man said. "You can find them around almost anywhere. Look in the crevices of the rock."

"Suppose we take a stroll," Bowman said, "and look the place over a bit."

Sam Brokay stretched and yawned.

"You fellows have got more energy than I have," he remarked. "This drive has sort of used me up. I'll stick around here."

Bowman and his companion moved toward the flap of the tent.

"Be sure to come back when you hear me pounding a piece of iron," the gold-brick man said. "I'll have a mighty fine chow."

Big Jim Grood turned to Bowman as they trudged out through the sand in the desert. He glanced surreptitiously over his shoulder, then lowered his voice.

"Why did you scrape the gold coating off of that brick?" he asked.

"Wanted to see what they'd do," Bowman remarked, chuckling.

"What they'll do," Grood said, "is plenty. They're going to kill us."

"Others have tried to kill us," Bowman reminded him, "and haven't got very far."

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"We've never been up against a combination quite like this," Grood remarked thoughtfully. "These men have got brains. They've quite probably got other confederates that they're going to get in touch with. We'll be outnumbered four or five to one. We're out here in the middle of a wild, sandy desert that is admirably adapted for their purpose. They can dig two unmarked graves. We will simply be two more men who have disappeared after winning money at Agua Caliente. The details of the disappearance will never be known because we've been in their hands almost continuously since this thing started."

Bowman said thoughtfully, "We *could* make a detour, get to the automobile, try and reach the authorities from the nearest telephone."

Grood laughed, and there was no mirth in his laughter. "Not a chance on earth," he said. "Remember, these men are desperate. They're killers. They've got other murders on their consciences. They are planning future murders. They kill ruthlessly, giving no quarter."

Bowman's eyes were cold and hard as polished steel.

"Very well then," he said, "we'll give no quarter."

Without any conscious volition on their part, the pair were following an indistinct trail that led toward one of the huge granite walls.

Jim Grood stopped, sniffed the air.

"Cigar smoke," he said.

CAUTIOUSLY, they started moving up-wind like two hunters stalking deer. They soon topped a little rise in the ground and looked down upon four men who were sprawled in the shade of the rocky wall, smoking and chatting.

At that moment there was the sound of a throbbing motor.

"Car coming," Bowman remarked.

Big Jim Grood gave him a significant glance.

Slowly, solemnly, as though it were some sacred ritual, the men took from the pockets of their coats the black masks with the white rings painted around the eyes. There was no need for conversation. Each knew that they were facing a showdown.

"Wait for the car," Bowman whispered.

There was a shrill, piercing whistle from the direction of the tent, a whistle twice repeated.

The effect upon the four men was magical. They jumped to their feet. The man who had been smoking a cigar tossed it away. A cigarette was ground beneath an impatient heel. The four men exchanged low words, then their hands slipped to holstered weapons, blued-steel glinted in the hot desert sunlight. Slowly, ominously, they started toward the tent.

Once more there came a whistled signal. One long and two short.

The men started to spread out.

The roaring motor of the approaching automobile could now be plainly distinguished.

Again came a whistle, sharp, shrill, menacing. This whistle sounded from a slightly different direction—much closer than the others.

"We're surrounded," Bowman said. "They're creeping up on us from behind."

The words had no sooner left his mouth than the hot desert air pulsated with the sharp crack of a weapon. A bullet whizzed past Bowman's ear, clipped a branch from a greasewood bush, and droned away like some angry hornet.

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Bowman dropped to the ground. Big Jim Grood whirled and fired all in one motion.

A voice shouted from ahead of them, "Here they are, boys. Let's get 'em."

There was the sound of running steps.

Bowman raised to his knees.

"Hurt?" asked Grood.

"No, just getting down out of sight, but then we can't see anything either. Let's charge while we've got them separated."

"Let's go," the ex-cop said gleefully, his eyes lighting at the prospect of action.

Shoulder to shoulder, the two men topped a little rise, came crashing down through the sagebrush.

The four men had separated, then when they heard the sound of the shots, had concentrated on the point where the sounds indicated the location of their quarry. Now, as the two men came charging down through the crackling sage, they flung up guns and hastily fired.

There is something about overwhelming numbers which, in itself, is a handicap. Each man becomes careless, depending unconsciously upon his companions; it is like the hunter who shoots into a flock of ducks, trusting to the very numbers to eliminate the necessity of aiming.

Jax Bowman and his companion had schooled themselves by long practice to wage efficient warfare.

AS the two masked men appeared in the open, they were greeted with a veritable fusillade of shots. Bullets whistled around them like hail stones pelting on a roof, and all of the bullets were wild.

There was something peculiar in the psychological reactions engendered by the black masks with the huge white rings around the eyes—a something which had a tendency to strike momentary terror. Moreover, whispers had been seeping through the underworld of these mysterious masked men who made war upon criminals, asking and giving no quarter.

"It's the White Rings!" shouted one of the men, and the words were still hot upon his lips when a bullet spun him half around. He flung up his hands, gave a sobbing gasp and pitched forward upon the hot sand.

Newspaper accounts which had, perhaps, been somewhat exaggerated, claimed that these mysterious masked men never missed a shot; that they had trained themselves to shoot rapidly and with uncanny accuracy.

The two men, their faces expressionless because of the black masks with the weird white rings about the eyes, fired with unhurried efficiency. Two more men pitched to the sand, quivered and lay still. The last of the party started to run.

As well have thought to run from an oncoming avalanche, as from this strange pair who had pledged themselves to a grim warfare upon crime, asked no quarter and gave no quarter.

Big Jim Grood's gun spoke once.

Grood turned to his companion.

Slowly he removed his mask.

"We gave them," he said, "all of the odds."

Jax Bowman's mask remained in place.

"You forget," he said, "that we have another chore."

He pointed with his gun toward the place where the fake prospector maintained his tent.

Big Jim Grood thrust extra shells into the magazine clip of his automatic.

"Some one's coming," he said.

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There was the sound of light, quick feet.

"A woman," said Grood.

Jax Bowman whisked off his mask, slipped the weapon into its holster a scant half second before Evelyn Brokay swung around a clump of greasewood, running with head down, elbows close to her sides, a nickel-plated revolver in her right hand.

Bowman's face was stern.

"Stop," he said.

She snapped her eyes to his. Instant relief flooded her face, tears were streaming from the eyes.

"Thank God," she said, "that you're safe! I never knew before."

"Never knew what?" asked Big Jim Grood, in the solemn voice of a judge pronouncing a death sentence.

"What happened to the men that I contacted for them," she said. "I knew it was some form of swindle. I wasn't foolish enough to think that they didn't have some ulterior motive, but I thought it was a gambling game and that I was getting victims for that. It was only after I reached San Francisco that I found out."

"Found out what?" Bowman inquired.

"What happened to the men."

"Who told you?"

"Rita Coleman," she said. "It was she who wired me to come to her."

"Then the wire wasn't a fake?"

"No, the wire was genuine enough, only Rita wasn't sick. She wanted to warn me."

"And so?" asked Bowman.

"And so," she said, "I flew back, tried to reach you in time. I found that you'd left. I found a letter in Sam's study which contained a map with full directions for getting here."

"And, of course," Grood said, "Sam isn't your father?"

"Of course not," she said. "His name's not Brokay at all, no more than mine is. He is Sam Belting. They called him 'Baloney' Belting, a confidence man. I'm Evelyn Mayer. I served a term in the penitentiary."

She stared at them defiantly.

JAX BOWMAN nodded. "I know about it," he said. "And tell me about Rita."

"Rita," she said, "warned me. She's on the dodge herself. There was some crime in New Orleans that she was mixed up in. She . . ."

The girl swayed.

Jim Grood jumped forward.

"Look here," he said, "you're wounded."

She turned a white face to his, smiled with bloodless lips, took a staggering step toward him. The gun dropped from her hand. A tremulous sigh escaped her lips. She dropped to the hot desert sand.

"Wait a minute," Big Jim Grood said gruffly as Bowman scooped the girl into his arms. "You forget those other two who are between us and the highway. They've heard the shooting, and they're laying for us. They'll probably ambush us somewhere, and they're the ones who shot the girl when she came out to warn us. I thought I heard shooting back there toward the tent."

Bowman started toward the tent, carrying his burden nestled in his arms.

"We haven't got any time to waste," he said. "This girl has got to get to a doctor. Get her gun and bring it along."

Jim Grood scooped up the gun which the girl had carried.

"Shoot," Bowman said grimly, "and shoot to kill."

He started walking, striding through

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the desert in a direct line for the automobile, heedless of any danger which might lie in his path.

Jim Grood snapped open the gun which the girl had carried, gave a quick look at the cylinder, clicked it shut.

"There's just a chance," he said, "she may have come on the two men sneaking up on us. There are four exploded shells in this revolver."

Bowman broke into a staggering run, plunging through the hot sand.

"Keep your guns ready," he said.

The two men reached the place where the cars were parked. There were no more shots. Far overhead, in the blue vault of the sky, a black speck wheeled into a circle. The circle became a spiral. Another black speck far off toward the east swung into motion.

Grood pointed.

"Turkey buzzards," he said, "the scavengers of the desert."

Bowman merely nodded. With tender fingers he pulled away the girl's sodden garments.

"In the back," he said. "I think it missed the kidney. They must have shot her when she tried to warn us. Then she turned and had it out with them in a finish fight."

He held her tenderly in his arms, smoothed the hair back from the damp forehead.

"Poor little kid," he muttered. "If she pulls through, I'm going to see that she has all the breaks that money can give her."

Big Jim Grood swung himself in behind the steering wheel of the car.

"There's a doctor at Banning," he said. "Brace yourself."

Bowman braced his feet, cushioned the girl in his arms.

The car lurched forward, the wheels throwing up a great cloud of sand as the car skidded for the first turn.

Overhead, the lone vulture had now been joined by three more. They dropped down in purposeful spirals.

CHAPTER V.

"NO REASON."

RHODA MARCHAND'S snipping scissors became silent as the lock on the door of the outer office clicked back. The door opened. Jax Bowman and Big Jim Grood entered the room, their faces flushed and angry red from exposure to the desert sun.

"You got my wire?" asked Jax Bowman.

"Yes, sir," she said, in that tone of crisp efficiency which was as distinctive as the sound of her snipping shears. "I got your telegram and secured the reservations. Two tickets around the world. The names were Rita Coleman and Evelyn Mayer. That's correct?"

"Correct," said Jax Bowman. "When do they sail?"

"At two o'clock this afternoon."

"Get me," Bowman said, "some flowers and some travelers' baskets of fruit, candy, books, and so forth."

Her swiftly flying pencil made a note.

"Yes, sir," she said.

Her fingers held up a newspaper clipping.

"In case you're interested," she said, "there's another newspaper clipping about the mysterious white rings again. An entire gang of criminals were wiped out in the desert northeast of Banning. Two of the criminals were escaped murderers. One was a desperate kidnaper that the police have been hunting for years. One had a long record of suspected swindles. Apparently there was a gun battle be-

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tween the gang and two men and a girl. The police think the girl was wounded. A physician in Banning gave first-aid treatment and then she disappeared in a chartered plane which the police have been unable to trace."

"How did they connect it with the white rings?" asked Jim Grood.

"There was a mask with white rings around the eyes found in the sand where one of the men had stooped to pick up the girl when she fell forward, wounded. Expert trackers have gone over the scene and advised what must have happened by studying the tracks in the sand."

Jax Bowman nodded.

"You may," he said, "put the clipping in on my desk."

"Do you want the other clippings of the white rings?" she inquired.

"No," he said, "I'll read that one, that's all."

Rhoda Marchand's face remained expressionless.

"Both of the young women who are to sail," she asked, "are—er—perfectly able to travel?"

Jax Bowman's face was unsmiling.

"Miss Mayer," he said, "has a temporary attack of acute rheumatism. It will be necessary for her to go aboard in a wheel chair, but I have every assurance that she'll recover from the attack and enjoy the cruise."

Miss Marchand reached a wrapped package from the drawer of her desk.

"Very well," she said, "I ordered this for you."

Jax Bowman held the package in his hand, looking at her questioningly.

"Some of the very best lotions," she said, "to remove the effects of sunburn."

"When did you order it?" asked Bowman.

"This morning," she said, "at nine o'clock."

"Was that," asked Big Jim Grood, "when you cut the clipping from the paper dealing with the strange deaths in the desert?"

Miss Marchand was a very efficient young woman. It could never be said of her that she didn't know her place, or that she failed to keep her own counsel. Her eyes were wide and innocent as she stared at Big Jim Grood.

"Why," she said, "I'm sure I can't remember, Mr. Grood. Is there any reason why I should?"

"No," said Jax Bowman with a smile twisting the corners of his mouth, "there is no reason whatever."

THE END

WEEK-ENDERS *attention!*

A guest is a person who drinks what his host serves unless he remembers to tuck a bottle of Crab Orchard into his bag. Straight Kentucky whiskey, no artificial aging, no artificial coloring, it's bottled from the barrel and sold at a reasonable price.

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"Draw your sword, before you disgrace your people further!"

Shula Set

By JAY LUCAS

Was Prince Nidro too proud to fight for the beautiful Shula Set —or was he really the coward, as the Himalayan warriors called him?

YES, sahib; since you wish to hear it, I will tell you the story of Shula Set, and of how she was greatly loved by Nidro the Little—such he was called, for in stature he was no more than most men of your race, which made him small among us. We are a tall people, sahib.

Permit me to throw more wood on the fire, sahib. By my beard, the night is cold for this time of the year! The wind blows cold from the Himalayas, as it does in the valley of my people, which is far beyond the mountains. Now the story:

Never had our Great Village bloomed as on the day when Shula Set came to visit us. The mud walls of our houses were bright with garlands, and from the outlying villages men had come, their sword hilts polished with ashes until they glittered in the sun. Each man wore his brightest turban of scarlet or blue, and each man's beard was washed and combed.

Halim Bertassah, our King, had given orders that on this day no man was to seek combat with friend or foe, and fifty picked swordsmen, myself among them, were sent through the

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streets to see that the order was obeyed.

At last, sahib, we heard the roll of drums and the wail of pipes, coming from toward the Pass of Kaf, and presently we saw the flash of sun upon steel or jewels. Then we saw a company of a hundred men come riding down the mountain, and when they came close we saw in their lead a girl who rode a pony of the blackness of night.

Still closer they came, and there was a drawing in of breaths around me, for it seemed that the girl was clad from head to foot in polished gold. It was not gold, sahib, but garments of the silk which comes from China, which had been dyed with great skill. Upon her head was a small turban such as women wear. It was the color of the sky above the mountains, and in it, above her forehead, shone the great Opal of Komer, which showed that she was the true Princess. . . . *Set* means Princess, sahib, in our tongue.

Shoes of heavy gold were upon her small feet, and she wore a single bracelet of jeweled gold upon one slender wrist. These, and the Opal, were the ancient marks of the Princess, and beyond them she was unadorned, which seemed strange to us, for behind her came the chief fighting men of her kingdom in a blaze of jewels which shamed the sun, in robes and turbans which shamed the flowers of spring.

And now she was among us, and silence fell upon my people, for we could clearly see her face. Ah, sahib, what a face! oval and beautiful as the face of a goddess from the deep mountains. Her great dark eyes looked out upon us with dignity, but it seemed that a tiny smile hung just behind those full red lips, ready to break forth as the sun comes through silvery clouds. To her smallest toe, she was a maiden of beauty such as never before had the earth seen; a beauty to drive men mad. At sight of her, the sword-arms of our fighting men fell weak to their sides.

Ah, sahib, little we knew then that when she came the gates of hell were thrown open under us, that poison and evil and bloodshed might enter our valley!

A TALL, grave man among our visitors spoke loudly:

"O King of the Inner Valley, the King of Komer trusts to your keeping his daughter, the fair flower of the Himalayas!"

And Halim Bertassah, who stood in the gate of our village to welcome her, replied:

"The flower shall not be crushed. In your presence, I ask my fighting men to swear their lives and honor to guard her."

Sahib, I smile in my beard to think of it; and unless I mistake there came a little smile in the snow-white beard of Halim Bertassah, who was called the Wise. For but too readily the sword of every man of us leaped high above him, and but too readily we swore, our eyes seeing nothing but her beauty.

"It is well!" said the tall one from Komer, and he and his men turned and galloped back toward the Pass. Perhaps his king had given him orders not to tarry lest there be fighting with our men upon that day, for it is our custom to match swords with all strangers that we may not disgrace our houses by giving hospitality to the coward or to one unskilled with the blade.

It chanced that I was standing near Nidro the Little, who was our Prince, and I looked toward him. By his eyes fixed upon her, and by his pale face, I knew that he had found love. Love, sahib, is not so lightly regarded among

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my people as among yours; with us, it is one of the Three Sacred Things—The Sword, Love, and Friendship.

Such were his emotions, that Nidro would have stood and permitted the Princess to dismount alone had I not seized his shoulder and pushed him toward her. Among us rank means little but the right to lead in battle.

Then, sahib, came the thing that made the blood boil in my heart. From the crowd near our King came one who was tall and handsome, with well-shaped beard, whose sword-scabbard jingled to his step. It was Sikmed Suart, who was called the Terrible, who was son of the King's brother. Between Nidro and Shula Set he stepped and he spoke, looking back over his shoulder with a smile:

"Cousin, permit me to assist the fair Princess. You are, unfortunately, undersized, and a weak staff for a maiden to lean upon."

On the crowd came a dead silence that it seemed could be felt with the hand. I looked toward old Halim, and on his face I saw a great blackness; by that I knew he would recall his ban upon drawn swords, and my heart leaped.

With joy in my heart, I turned to Prince Nidro, that I might offer to be his witness in the passage of swords. And then it was that the blood left my heart and my beard hung in shame. For Nidro the Little, he who was my Prince, was backing into the crowd, his face white as snow, his hand far from his sword-hilt.

Sikmed Suart bowed low, and he it was who helped Shula Set from her pony. They stood side by side, smiling into each other's eyes, and as she smiled the red came to her cheeks. Behind me I heard a fighting man's oath:

"By Allah's beard, they are a handsome pair—would they not make us a fitting king and queen when Halim is gone!"

I saw a figure slinking toward a little wood, and a great rage came over me, a rage that made me tremble and grow weak. I pushed through the crowd, and those who were in my way I shoved roughly to one side, nor did I notice the scowls my bad manners brought, nor the hands that fell to sword-hilts.

I ENTERED the little wood, and strode to Prince Nidro, the sword leaping from its scabbard to my hand. I saw a tear upon his pale cheek, and at sight of it my arm shook with fury.

"Draw, dog!" I shouted, "Draw, spawn of the Slant-Eyes! Draw your sword, and die upon mine before you disgrace our people further!"

He looked at me as though he did not see me—as though beyond me was that maddening, beautiful face smiling at him with contempt. He spoke, softly:

"You, too, Hurdath Sethoe!—you whom I had thought my best friend!"

Unbidden, words poured from my lips:

"Your best friend I am, Nidro—Coward! I come to do what your best friend should have done long ago, to slay you where you stand! And may Allah grant that you draw my blood before you die, that you may not go Beyond with virgin sword!—then, before your father slays me, I shall make it known that you died like a man, fighting."

He smiled wearily upon me.

"You do love me greatly, Hurdath Sethoe!" he said. "You will give your life that I may die in honor!"

But still he stood there, sword undrawn. I leaped upon him. I am a

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strong man, sahib, and when I struck him with my open hand across the face he staggered and almost fell.

"Draw!" I shouted—I was mad with shame—"Draw, coward and dog, or by Allah's beard I shall send you to hell with sword undrawn!"

Still he paused. I raised my point; I was about to run him through as he stood defenseless. And then he spoke:

"Hurdath Sethoe, I will draw and fight you, but only because I, too, am loyal to the Third Sacred Thing—Friendship; I will not see you punished for slaying a man who stood unarmed. Guard! my swordsman friend."

Those were joyful words to me, sahib! I leaped in, and lunged close to his face. I meant to give him time to draw my blood, that he might not have the disgrace of going Beyond with virgin sword.

But alas! he was not fighting me, although his sword cut the air feebly. I knew that from boyhood he had parried much with the blunted weapons, and so knew more than this of swordsmanship. And was he not of the direct line of Iskander, whose sons are born to the sword? He thrust and guarded feebly, as might a priest of the slant-eyed people, and not once did he seek my heart. I pricked him many times, but it served no end.

And then a plan came to me, for it was odious that a prince should die with virgin sword. I turned my left side more than a fencer should, and awaited my chance. At last it came! His sword was forward; I dashed my left arm against its point swiftly. My blood dyed his blade!

I shouted with joy, for now he could go to Paradise when he fell. And now to end it swiftly. By a trick—a trick which he could have guarded had he cared—I picked his weapon upon mine and cast it far off upon the grass. Then I leaped upon him; my sword-point touched his throat.

"Die!" I shouted in triumph, "Die, Prince Nidro, whom I have made a man in spite of himself!"

AND then I paused suddenly, for my eyes were meeting his, and a strange thing they saw. He did not give an inch; he but folded his arms and smiled at me—smiled softly, wearily, and on his face was the look of one who sees the open gates. He spoke:

"Thrust, friend!" he said. "You are right; it is the best way."

Still I paused, those sad, unfearing eyes meeting mine. And suddenly I cast my sword far off and sank upon the ground, my head in my hands, groaning. Presently he sank beside me, and I felt his arm fall across my shoulders; I heard his voice:

"My friend! My one true friend!"

My hand stole up and seized his arm, and for a long time we sat as though we were lovers. I could not look at him, but at last I spoke:

"Nidro, my Prince, why do you live as a coward, when in your eyes I have seen the courage of a tiger?"

He was silent so long—staring far off—that I thought he had not heard me. Then he spoke, suddenly, furiously:

"Blood! Blood! We live in it!—wallow in it!—swim in it! How I hate it!"

"Hate it!" I gasped, unable to understand, for if men do not fight and shed blood, how can they be called men?

"Yes, hate it!" he cried, "Something in my heart, I know not what, cries out against it! You cursed my virgin sword; is it not better than your wanton, which flies to any man? Why

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cannot we live in peace—let our swords rest in their scabbards?"

These, sahib, were the strangest words ever heard in the Inner Valley. I sat and pondered them, but from them would come no sense nor meaning. That men should not fight!

A while more we sat in silence, and then I left him. Once I looked back; still he sat there, chin cupped in hands, staring out through the trees. But I knew that he saw neither trees nor the snowy peaks beyond; he saw a beautiful oval face, and great dark eyes which looked at him with contempt and scorn.

A month went by, Shula Set dwelling in the house of our King. No, sahib, I do not call it a palace, for although it was great and of many rooms it was but of mud as were the other houses.

I, who was assigned to the Princess's guard, groaned in spirit as I saw how she, the proud and beautiful, treated our prince. At first, indeed, it were as though he was a repulsive one whose touch was contamination, but later she seemed to learn to tolerate him—this, we knew, was to please his father, for she had come to love our Halim, as did all men.

Sikmed Suart encouraged her to meet the Prince and talk to him, and well we knew why; that he, Sikmed the Terrible, might appear all the more brave and handsome in her eyes. Once Sikmed quarreled with and slew a stout swordsman before her, and her eyes shone in joy of his brilliant sword-play, for was she not the daughter of swordsmen even to the days of Iskander, which is two thousand years?

And then pity came to her eyes as she saw Prince Nidro hasten from the spot, shuddering and pale. And later, at the request of King Halim, she spent much time with the Prince, telling him stories of fighting men of old and of their bravery, trying to awaken in him a manhood which none but his father thought him to have—none but his father, and I, Hurdath Sethoe, who had seen him smile in the face of death.

Once I chanced to pass behind them in the garden, and I heard him sigh and speak strange words: "The sword that pierces a man's heart breaks a woman's." And I saw the Princess spring to her feet and hasten from him, her eyes flashing and her lips trembling in scorn at such words. Often Prince Nidro spoke such strange things, and we did not understand. Since then I have come to know of your great men whom you call poets, who put music in words of wisdom that they may linger in the mind.

AND then the plotting began. Plotting it hardly was, for it was secret to no man but Halim and the Prince; it was taken for granted that no friend was left to Nidro after that shameful thing which had happened at the gate of our village.

This was what I heard: On the night of the full moon, Shula Set was to fly with Sikmed Suart, her maidens, and a small guard. They were to cross the Pass of Kaf to her father's kingdom, where, she said, her father would not oppose their marriage when he learned that Nidro was a known coward. Then, when Halim had gone to Iskander, they would return to rule our valley—for who would oppose them under the banner of Nidro the Coward?—such was he now called openly.

That much of the plot was known to all, and to most men there was no more. But Usfur, the Prince of Darkness, must have given me cunning, sahib. One dark night I followed Sikmed the Terrible to a small house beyond the wall of our village, and

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there, listening beneath a window, I heard a most hateful thing; a thing that made my head reel in horror as though the vapors of hell were around me.

This I heard: when Sikmed and Shula Set were well beyond the Pass, so that no blame could fall on them, the old King, whose hair was silver, was to die of a sudden bowel complaint. In brief, sahib, our Halim was to be poisoned. Then Sikmed would return to rule us, and greatly would he reward the poisoners.

Sahib, I almost laughed aloud — it would have been what we call "the devil's laugh," a laugh that bears all but mirth. Knowing Sikmed as I did, I knew that the poisoners' portion would be the swift dagger of the assassin before they could speak incautious words. Yes, thus, and thus only, would Sikmed repay those who did this evil thing.

I crouched beneath the window, sahib, my spirit sick to think that Shula Set, who seemed as gentle as she was beautiful, should be engaged in this terrible thing. I heard the men within the room stand up to leave, and I was about to hasten off.

Then the deep voice of Sikmed Suart rose again, and I paused to listen. He was warning his companions not to let the plot come to the ears of Shula Set, for if it did she might refuse to marry him. She, he said, had had queer thoughts put into her head by listening so much to Nidro the Half-Wit—another name for him of many names.

Sahib, the relief of knowing her innocent was so great that I almost allowed myself to be discovered where I lay.

THEN, sahib, it was that I myself plotted—a strange thing for a man of action to do. To my prince I went, and to him I lied without shame. I said that on the night of the full moon I had a duel to come with a famous swordsman whose name I must not disclose. I asked Prince Nidro to assist me in practice with the dull blades, for I should need to practice much or I should be slain.

Nidro wanted to go between us, that the duel might be avoided, but I told him that the insult was far too great. He argued long, but at last, as my friend, he consented to the practice, on condition that if I found myself sufficiently skillful I should run my opponent through the arm instead of the heart. Because of this strange condition, he seemed very anxious that I practice much and become skillful.

Next morning, I stole secretly to the Prince's room, which was very large, though low. I cautiously barred the door behind me, and glanced around at the many swords and shields on the walls.

Prince Nidro arose from his couch to meet me. He was dressed only in a light tunic. He took two blunted swords from the wall, and, with a little smile I did not then understand, gave me my choice.

For a moment we stood shrugging our shoulders to supple them, and then, without wasting time, he came gliding toward me, his blunt point raising. He said a word that in your language would mean "On guard!"

I slid in toward him, my right foot ahead, my blunt sword licking gently forward—I meant to make the practice none too strenuous for the first few days, for I feared he might lose heart against my greater skill and not wish to continue. In the middle of the room we met, and our swords rang together.

Sahib, even now the wonder of what happened next comes back to me, the shock of surprise I felt. First a sword

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touched mine gently, and then I seemed surrounded by swords. Swords seemed to leap upon me from the very walls. But it was only one sword, a single sword that hissed through my guard and past my ear, flecked and darted with the speed of light—as well might I have been armed with a woman's sewing needle!

A sob of shame came to my lips, but back I was forced, lunging wildly and vainly, until my back touched the wall. My shoulder struck a shield, and it fell clattering to the ground. And before me stood a youth not nearly my height and of slender figure. He laughed in my face, and ever his sword rang against my head, prodded my ribs.

At last, when I was almost helpless with fatigue, Nidro dropped his point and stood smiling up at me. And I, sahib; my beard dropped on my chest and I groaned with shame, that thus I, a master swordsman, should be brought to shame and mockery. But Nidro came to me quickly, and gently placed his hand on my shoulder.

"Hurdath Sethoe," he said, "why should your head bow in grief? Forget you the old saying of our people: 'When deer eats tiger, then shall a son of Iskander find his match at swords.'"

You may think it strange that such expertness was his. I have heard that in your game of billiards, which the officer sahibs play, there is sometimes found a child who can overcome the most expert man, because of a strange judgment of the eye which is his. So it is with the sons of Iskander; in their blood is a keenness of eye for movement, and a quickness of the wrist, which is not given to other men. This strange gift had been given to Nidro in his cradle; therefore none but another son of Iskander might hope to overcome him.

"Prince," I said, "that night in the wood, you could have slaim me when you chose."

"On guard, fierce swordsman!" he said, and he laughed again.

It was as before. Like a panther of the mountains he moved after me across the room, and again it was as though a legion of swordsmen surrounded me. Again he made mock of my skill.

But on the third bout I saw him weaken. He was not accustomed to the game, nor were his arm muscles trained to it. At last I took the offensive; my blunt weapon found his ribs, and again his throat. Soon he threw down his sword and laughed, mopping his face with a napkin.

"By Allah!" he said, "I am glad the blades are dull, else my blood would stain the floor!"

"And by Allah's mother!" I swore, "I too am glad they are dull, or the first bout would have been my last!"

DAILY we practiced thus, and at last it was I who threw down the sword, for now his arm had grown accustomed to the game and tired no more. And daily he seemed to get more joy from the game, until his eye began to kindle when I entered. Then one day he suddenly lowered his point and asked a question:

"Think you, Hurdath Sethoe, that I could match swords with my cousin Sikmed?"

A flame of joy leaped in my heart.

"You would fight him?" I asked.

"No, no!" he said, "I merely ask from curiosity."

"Then," I said sadly, "I will answer; I know not. He is of your own line, the line of Iskander. Usfur has given you both such skill that no man could tell the outcome."

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He smiled softly, and his blade made little cuts and swishes through the air.

"It would be a great fight, he and I!"

"By Allah, that it would!" I shouted. "I run to him with your challenge!"

Then he started, as though awaking from a dream.

"Stop!" he cried, for I was already tugging open the door. "I am a man of peace, though I come of fighting stock. Ah, how I love the feel of the sword, the good sword of steel!—but I shall use only the blunt weapon of play."

"You are mad!" I said in amazement.

Then I understood; he had two souls within him, each fighting for the mastery. I waited, hoping the fighting man's soul would conquer—that he would send me with his challenge—but with a laugh he pushed me through the door.

At last came the night of the full moon, a night when strange things indeed were to happen in the Inner Valley. I sent Nidro to wait for me in the woods outside the village, in a little clearing where I told him I was to meet my enemy.

And I? I crouched in the shadow of a house and watched a small party steal softly through the gate and ride toward the Pass of Kaf. I heard a soft giggling of girls' voices, and sometimes the deeper but hushed laugh of a bearded fighting man. They passed close to me, and I saw a strange thing indeed, for the girl on the black horse cried softly, and often looked back as she rode, although she went of her own will. But who may understand the heart of a woman?

Then it was that I stole to my pony and left the village by another gate. I dashed to where Nidro awaited me on the other side of the village, wondering why my opponent had not come.

"Prince," I shouted, "my private fight is naught, for terrible things happen this night! Even now Shula Set is being borne away by a band of ruffians, and is far outside our walls!"

"What!" he cried, and for the first time I heard the wild ring of a fighting man in his voice. "Surely not stolen from her guards; she must have gone of her own will!"

"Alas!" I said. "She cried bitterly as she passed through the gate, and often she looked back."

Thus, sahib, I shamed my beard with a double lie, for such my people call such untruthful truths, which are worse than simple lies. But Allah will forgive lies told in such good cause.

"By the devil's ears!" shouted Nidro, and his was the voice of an enraged tiger. "Let us run to the village and call out our fighting men!"

"Prince," I said, and in truth my heart was heavy to say it, "name to me one fighting man besides myself who would unsheath his sword at your call."

He swore a horrible oath and suddenly he whirled his pony.

"Then alone shall I fight them, though Usfur be their leader!"

"Alone!" I laughed aloud. "Prince, forget you Hurdath Sethoe?"

AH, sahib, how my heart sang that night as we raced upward through the mountains! For beside me rode my Prince, and now he was a full man, and not merely by trickery of mine in putting blood upon his blade. It seemed certain that the morning sun would find us cold upon the mountain, but what mattered that if we died as men die, our red swords in our hands?

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For days I had planned this ride, so now I led Prince Nidro by a short but rugged route to the Pass. I knew that Sikmed and his band would not go this shorter way, for he did not fear pursuit, and these bowlder-strewn ravines would make unpleasant riding for the Princess.

In less than two hours we stopped our sweating ponies at a small pass far below the Pass of Kaf. We did not need to go farther, for below us we could see a little band come creeping up leisurely, as though going to a feast.

Then only it was that Nidro asked who led this band. "Liar!" he said when I told him, for was not Sikmed his cousin.

I spoke again, deliberately:

"Nor is this all the infamy," I said, "for know you that Sikmed has paid men to give poison to your father when he himself is safe across the Pass. Then Sikmed would be King."

I saw his sword fly from his scabbard.

"Dog!" he said. "Take back that lie upon a man of Iskander's blood, or you die in your saddle!"

"I take not back the truth," I said stubbornly, and even in my peril I almost shouted aloud with pride of my Prince, who now acted as became a man of our people.

"Then," he said, "I give you but an instant to swear to its truth upon your sword!" and his point touched my throat.

I raised my sword and swore the oath. The sword of Nidro fell nerveless to his side, and his face went white, for he knew then that I spoke true words.

No more did we say until the little band had come close. Nor did I know of Nidro's plan to save my life by paying his own—even in that hour of peril he thought not of himself but of me, whom he had called friend. And I but a fighting man of common blood.

And now the ponies approached. The Princess had ceased to cry, but in the moonlight we could see that her face was white and set, and held very high—she seemed now to have a beauty that was not of the earth.

I was about to charge upon them with the battle yell of my clan, but Nidro seized my bridle and forced me to ride gently from the shadows. He spoke so softly that I trembled, fearing that he might fail to give battle at the last moment. He gave our common greeting:

"Allah is good, gentlemen!"

There was a quick murmur of surprise. I saw a smile of joy come to the handsome face of Sikmed Suart, who answered:

"Good indeed is Allah!" And he bowed gracefully in his saddle.

"And now, good cousin," said my Prince, "we two shall fight. No swords shall be drawn but ours. Is that agreeable to you?"

Sikmed threw back his well-shaped beard, and and laughed his deep, slow laugh.

"My cousin, it is more than agreeable—the rest shall be left as witnesses that you gave the challenge. Then I may ride back to our village to-night, to tell your good father that I am his legal heir, and none may question me."

"Ah, yes—yes!" Nidro the Little smiled, "My sword awaits yours, cousin."

THEY dismounted and rid themselves of their heavy robes, which they had worn against the chill of the night. Then they faced each other, shrugging their shoulders to supple them, swishing their blades in

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little practice cuts to limber their wrists. When they spoke to each other, it was with gentle courtesy, as became men of their rank.

There in the bright moonlight, we fighting men formed a little ring around them, and we chuckled softly in our beards, and our turbans nodded. The rest chuckled at what they thought would be a brief passage; I chuckled at the fight which I knew was to come—two sons of Iskander. Of course I did not hope for Nidro to win, for Sikmed had had much more practice with the blades. I was happy to think that my Prince would die as became a man of our people.

I heard the soft, courteous voice of Nidro:

"Guard, cousin—this is the death, with your permission!"

There was a drawing in of breaths around me. The eyes of the bearded fighting men were staring in wonder; they knew not what had come upon Nidro the Meek.

They crossed swords.

In an instant, sahib, I saw a great astonishment come to the face of Sikmed Suart; so great was his surprise that his point dropped. In that brief instant, Nidro might have slain him, but instead he leaped back and lowered his blade, waiting. Then it was that I heard a rough oath behind me:

"By Allah's beard! Prince Nidro the Man!"

But when Sikmed closed again, there was joy on his face, for evil though he was, he was brave and loved a good fight.

Allah! sahib, that was a fight!—a passage that forever shall be talked of in the Inner Valley. For half an hour sword sang against sword, until both men bled from many wounds; but neither could reach the life-wells of the other. I breathed a thanks to Allah, or Usfur, or whoever it was who had sent me to practice with Nidro so that his sword-arm might not tire before the fight was well begun.

We heard the sharp click of steel in the still night air, and the panting of breath, and the soft pat and shuffle of feet. We saw the moon glint on the swiftly playing steel.

We fighting men leaned forward as we watched, and sometimes our wrists darted in time with the wrists of the fighters. We gave hoarse shouts of encouragement to first one and then the other, for we had long ceased to care who won, such swordplay did we see, and so bravely did each man stand his ground. Such are the men of our people, sahib, that to a man we would have given our heart's blood in a cup to the victor of such a combat. Beside me a battle-scarred fighting man gave thanks to Allah the Merciful for permitting him to be there.

And then there came a sudden burst of play, so fast that we watchers, who had cut our teeth on the sword-hilt, could not follow it. I saw Prince Nidro stagger back, the blood streaming rapidly down his face.

Back he staggered, into the shadow beneath a great tree, and after him glided Sikmed the Terrible, his point ahead. Sikmed's sword did not flash now, for it was red; terrible indeed he looked as he slid in upon the falling man.

THEY met again, but the shadow was so deep that we could not follow the play. I heard the soft little swish that steel makes when it enters flesh, and I heard the soft little thud of a hilt striking a breast bone. In spite of the glorious combat I had

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witnessed, a great sadness came suddenly over me, and then only I knew how well I had loved my Prince.

Now a man lay with the spots of moonlight playing across him, and beside him his victor staggered and fell in weariness, and in weakness from loss of blood. We fighting men prepared to run forward.

And Shula Set—I heard a woman's scream behind me; a terrible shriek that rang across the valley. I heard a wail that might have come from the open gates of hell; they were words which I had heard before:

"'*The sword that pierces a man's heart breaks a woman's!*'"

Now the Princess came flying among us, tearing wildly at those who tried to block her path. Her long black hair streamed behind her. As she passed, I heard close to my ear her terrible cry:

"He is dead—dead—my beloved! Let me die upon his body!"

Have I not said, sahib, that love among my people is a thing you could hardly understand, so deep and wild is it? My heart seemed to burst with the sadness of it. Through the thing which closed my throat, I managed to shout after her:

"But, Princess, Sikmed is not dead—he has but fainted from loss of blood!"

She did not hear me. She threw herself with a shivering moan upon one of the still figures. *It was the figure of Nidro!*

"Death! Death!" she moaned, "has take my beloved! My Nidro who spurned me—who would not help me from my saddle—who would not ask my hand in marriage as my father expected. To spite him I fled with his enemy, and now he lies dead—Nidro my handsome one!"

Sahib, we fighting men stood and stared at each other as though we had become dumb and foolish. But who so foolish as he who thinks he can read the heart of a woman?

Then I saw a faint, slow movement in the shadows. A hand raised weakly, and the gentle eyes of Nidro opened, to smile weakly into the eyes of the girl above him. Then only did we see what the shadow had hidden before; a jeweled sword-hilt which rested on the breast of Sikmed the Terrible. Sikmed Suart had met his master at the game of swords.

There is little more to tell, sahib. The Princess saw that Nidro lived, and a great shame came upon her that she had told her love to one who had said no word of love to her. She ran to her pony and fled toward the Pass of Kaf, toward her father's kingdom.

But I, taking the fastest pony, overtook her, and I told her of the Prince's great love for her; told her that he would have spoken but that he thought himself unworthy of her beauty and goodness. And she laughed wildly and bitterly in my face, and she cut me across the cheek with her riding whip—there, sahib, lies the scar to this day—and she tried to ride on.

Quickly I bethought me, and I seized her bridle, and I swore upon my sword to the truth of my words, so that she could but believe. And after a little talk, she turned her pony and rode back with me, and she herself it was who nursed the Prince back to health. And when he was well again, there was a wedding, with feasting that nearly ruined both kingdoms. So it is sahib, that now my people are ruled by King Nidro the Good, and his Queen Shula, to whom may Allah give long years and children many as the stars.

THE END

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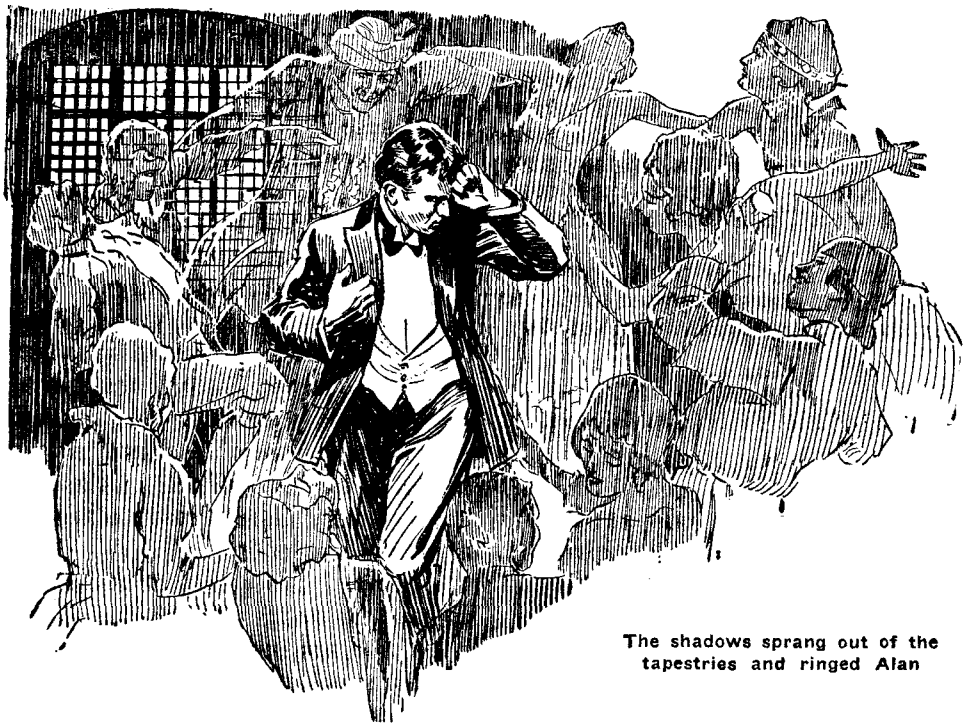

The shadows sprang out of the tapestries and ringed Alan

Creep, Shadow!

By A. MERRITT

Alan Caranac, pitted against a modern witch, finds that carrying the fight to her is dangerous business

LEADING UP TO THIS INSTALLMENT

JUST before Dr. Alan Caranac, brain authority, returned to New York from a world trip, his friend Dick Ralston committed suicide. Handsome, wealthy, in good health, there was no reason why Ralston should have taken his own life. Alan Caranac was soon to learn a startling reason, or what his friend, Dr. William Bennett, declared to be the cause.

Alan attended a dinner at Bill Bennett's home, where he met Bill's sister Helen; Dr. Austin Lowell; Dr. Rene de Keradel, European specialist; and the Demoiselle Dahut d'Ys de Keradel, the latter's beautiful daughter.

At that dinner, strange and terrible theories were advanced by the sinister de Keradel. He claimed to have discovered the secret of the transmigration of souls. Both he and his daughter, Alan discovered, were masters of hypnotism and mental suggestion.

Bill Bennett indirectly accused de Keradel of having been involved in Ralston's death. He told how Ralston had told him of a shadow that dogged his footsteps—a beautiful woman. As days went on, the shadow became more and more real to him, became, in fact, a living woman. He feared and hated her—at the same time he madly yearned to possess her. She promised herself to him if he would take his

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life. Bill insinuated that de Keradel and his daughter had a hand in the matter.

After the de Keradels departed from the dinner party, Dr. Lowell told of a woman he had known and fought, the "doll maker," who had possessed the uncanny powers of a witch. This woman, now dead, was the lover of Dr. de Keradel, and taught him her secrets.

The next night Alan was supposed to call on Helen; instead he went to the de Keradel apartment. He is telling the story.

CHAPTER VIII (*Continued*).

IN DAHUT'S TOWER—NEW YORK.

THE Demoiselle was at the far side of the octagonal chamber, holding one of the hangings half aside. There was another room there, for light streamed through and formed a faint rosy aureole around her head. And the beauty of her made me for a dozen heart-beats forget everything else in the world—even forget that there was a world. From white shoulders to white feet she was draped in a web-like gown of filmy green in flowing folds like the stola of the women of ancient Rome. Her feet were sandaled. Two thick braids of her pale gold hair dropped between her breasts, and through her drapings every lovely line and contour was plain. She wore no jewels—nor needed any. Her eyes both caressed and menaced me—and there was both tenderness and menace in her laughter.

She came toward me and put her hands on my shoulders. Her fragrance was like that of some strange flower of the sea, and touch and fragrance rocked me.

She said, and in the Breton tongue:

"So, Alain—you still are cautious. But tonight you go only when it is my will that you go. You taught me my lesson well, Alain de Carnac."

I asked, stupidly, still under that numbing spell of her beauty:

"When did I teach you anything, Demoiselle?"

She answered:

"Long . . . and long . . . and long ago." And now I thought that the menace nigh banished the tenderness in her eyes. She said, absently:

"I had thought that it would be easy to say that which I have to say when I met you to-night, Alain. I thought the words would pour from me . . . as the waters poured over Ys. But I am confused . . . I find it difficult . . . the memories struggle against each other . . . hate and love battle . . ."

By now I had gotten myself a little in hand. I said:

"I, too, am confused, Demoiselle. I do not speak the Breton as you, and that, perhaps, is why I am dull to your meaning. Could we not speak French or English?"

The truth was that the Breton was a little too—intimate; brought me too close to her mind. The other languages would be a barrier. And then I thought: a barrier against what?

She said, fiercely:

"No. And no longer are you to call me Demoiselle, nor de Keradel. You know me!"

I laughed and answered:

"If you are not the Demoiselle de Keradel, then you are the sea-fay Melusine . . . or Gulnar the Sea-born . . . and I am safe in your"—I looked at the hangings—"aquarium."

She said, somberly: "I am Dahut . . . Dahut the White, Dahut of the Shadows . . . Dahut of ancient Ys. Reborn. Reborn here—" she tapped her forehead. "And you are Alain de Carnac, my ancient love . . . my great love . . . my treacherous love. So beware!"

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SUDDENLY she leaned toward me; she pressed her lips to mine, savagely; so savagely that her small teeth bruised them. It was not a kiss one could be indifferent to. My arms held her, and it was as though I held flame sheathed in fair flesh. She thrust me from her with what was almost a blow, and so strongly that I stumbled back a step.

She walked to the table and filled from a ewer two slender glasses with pale yellow wine. She said, with mockery:

"To our last parting, Alain. And to our reunion." And as I hesitated at the toast: "Don't be afraid—it is no witch's potion."

I touched her glass and drank. We sat, and at some signal I neither saw nor heard, two other of the oddly dressed servants came in and served. They did it in the olden way, kneeling. The wines were excellent, the dinner was superb. The Demoiselle ate and drank daintily. She spoke little, at times deep in thought, at times regarding me with that blend of tenderness and malice. I have never dined tête-à-tête with a pretty girl and had so little to say—or with one who was so silent. We were, in fact, like two opponents in some game upon which vital issues hung, studying our moves, studying each other, before beginning it. Whatever the game, I had the uncomfortable feeling that the Demoiselle knew much more about it than I—had in all probability made the rules.

From the great room beyond the hidden door came muted music and singing. They were queer melodies, vaguely familiar. It was as though the singers were in that room, and yet far, far away. They were shadows of songs and music. Shadows of songs? Suddenly I thought of Dick's description of the singing of the shadow. A creep went down my spine. I looked up from my plate to find Dahut's gaze upon me, amused, mockery in it. I felt wholesome anger begin to stir in me. The lurking fear of her vanished. She was a beautiful woman, and dangerous. That was all. But how dangerous rested with me. I had no doubt she knew what I was thinking. She summoned the servants and they cleared the table, leaving the wine. She said, matter-of-factly:

"We'll go out on the terrace. Bring the wine with you, Alain. You may need it."

I laughed at that, but picked up a bottle and glasses and followed her through the hangings into the room of rosy light.

It was her bedroom.

Like the other it was octagonal, but, unlike it, the top was that of a true turret—that is, the ceiling did not run straight across. If lifted in a graceful cone. In fact, the two rooms made a double tower, and I surmised that the walls were false, having been built into what had been one large chamber. In this they were hung with the same sea-green tapestries but with no figures upon them. As I walked slowly in, their hues seemed to change and shift, darkening here into ocean depths, lightening there into the pale emerald of shallows, while constantly within them moved shadows; shadowy shapes that floated up from the depths, then loitered, then languidly sank beneath the range of sight.

There was a low, wide bed, an ancient armoire, a table, two or three low stools, a curiously carven and painted chest, a couch. The rosy light streamed down from some cunningly hidden fixture in the turret's roof. I felt again an uncomfortable sense of familiarity

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that had come to me when I had looked upon the black pebble of the bracelet.

A CASEMENT opened onto the terrace. I set the wine upon the table and walked out upon the terrace, Dahut beside me. The tower was at the top of the building as I had thought, and at its southeast corner. At my right was the magical night panorama of New York. Far below, the East River was a belt of tarnished silver studded with the diamonded bands of bridges. About twenty feet beneath was another terrace, plain to the view since the building was of the step-back kind.

I said to the Demoiselle, jestingly:

"Is this like your tower in ancient Ys, Dahut? And was it from a balcony such as this that your servants hurled the lovers of whom you had tired?"

This was in questionable taste, but she had invited it; and, beside, the inexplicable anger was growing within me. She answered:

"It was not so high. Nor were the nights in Ys like these. You looked up into the skies to see the stars instead of down upon the city. And my tower looked down upon the sea. Nor did I cast my lovers from it, since in—death—they served me better than in life. And not by casting them from any tower could I have brought that to be."

She had spoken tranquilly; with evident sincerity. Whether she had spoken truth or not, I had then no slightest doubt that what she had spoken she believed to *be* truth. I caught her by the wrists. I said:

"Did you kill Ralston?"

She answered with that same tranquillity:

"Why, yes."

She pressed a sandaled foot on mine and leaned close to me, looking up into my eyes. Hot jealousy mingled with my wrath. I asked:

"Had he—been your lover?"

She said:

"He would not have been had I met you before I met him."

"And those—others? You killed them?"

"Why, yes."

"And were they too—"

"Not if I had met you—"

My hands ached to go round her throat. I tried to drop her wrists, and could not. It was as though she held them, clamped. I could not move a finger. I said:

"You are a flower of evil, Dahut, and your roots feed on hell—" I said: "It was his money then that bought you?"

She leaned back and laughed; and her eyes laughed and in the laughter of eyes and mouth was triumph. She said:

"In the old days you cared nothing about lovers who had gone before. Why do you care now, Alain? But no—it was not his money. Nor did he die because he had given it to me. I was tired of him, Alain . . . yet I liked him . . . and Brittis had had no amusement for a long, long time, poor child . . . if I had not liked him I would not have given him to Brittis . . ."

I CAME back to sanity. Undoubtedly, the Demoiselle was scoring me off for those suggestions of mine about her the night before. Her method might be a bit elaborate, but certainly it had been effective. I was more than a little ashamed of myself. I dropped her hands and laughed with her . . . but why and whence that anger and the devastating jealousy?

I thrust that doubt aside. I said, ruefully:

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"Dahut, that wine of yours must have been more potent than I knew. I've been acting like a damned fool, and I ask forgiveness."

She looked at me, enigmatically:

"Forgiveness? Now—I wonder. I am cold. Let us go in."

I followed her into the turreted room. Suddenly I, too, felt cold, and a strange weakness. I poured some wine and drank it down. I sat upon the couch. There was a haziness about my thoughts, as though a cold fog had gathered 'round my brain. I poured another glass of the wine. I saw that Dahut had brought one of the stools and was sitting at my feet. In her hands was an old and many-stringed lute. She laughed again, and whispered:

"You ask forgiveness—and you do not know what it is that you ask."

She touched the strings and began to sing. There was something archaic about that song—all weird, sighing minors. I thought that I ought to know that song; that I did know it; had heard it often and often—in just such a turret as this. I looked at the walls. The hues in the hangings were shifting more rapidly . . . changing from malachite depths to pallid shoals. And the shadows were rising more and more rapidly; were coming closer and closer to the surface before they sank again . . .

Dahut said:

"You brought the bracelet I gave you?"

Passively, I thrust my hand into my pocket, drew out the bracelet and gave it to her. She fastened it around my wrist. The red symbol on the pebble gleamed as though traced in lines of fire. She said:

"You have forgotten I gave you that . . . long and long and long ago . . . lover I loved above all men . . . lover I have hated above all men. And you have forgotten the name it bears. Well, hear that name once more, Alain de Carnac . . . and remember what you ask me to forgive."

She spoke a name. Hearing it, a million sparks seemed to burst in my brain—fireflies dissipating the cold fog that gripped it.

She spoke it again, and the shadows within the green tapestries rushed to the surface of the waves, twined arms, locked hands.

Round and round and round the walls they danced . . . faster and ever faster . . . shadows of women and of men. Hazily, I thought of the dancing girls in the "House of the Heart's Desire," dancing in a circle to the drums of the Senussi sorcerers . . . as these shadows were dancing to the luting of Dahut.

Faster and faster the shadows spun, and then they, too, began to sing; in faint whispering voice, shadows of voices . . . and in the green tapestries the shifting colors became the surge and withdrawal of great waves, and the shadow singing became the murmuring of waves, and then their song, and then a clamorous shouting.

Again Dahut spoke the name. The shadows sprang out of the tapestries and ringed me . . . closer and closer. The shouting of the waves became the roaring of a tempest, beating me down and down—out and out.

CHAPTER IX.

IN DAHUT'S TOWER—YS.

HURRICANE roaring and clamor of the sea dwindled into the ordered beat of great waves breaking against some barrier. I was stand-

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ing at a window in some high place looking out over a white-capped, stormy sea. The sunset was red and sullen.

It made a wide path of blood across the waters.

I leaned out the window, eyes straining to the right to find something that ought still to be visible in the gathering dusk. I found it. A vast plain covered with immense upright stones; hundreds of them, marching from every side to a squat, rock-built temple like the hub of a gigantic wheel of which the monoliths were the spokes. They were so far away that they looked like bowlders, then suddenly by some trick of mirage they quivered and swam close. The rays of the dying sun painted them and they seemed splashed with blood and the squat temple to drip blood.

I knew that this was Carnac, of which I was the Lord. And that the squat temple was the Alkar-Az where the Gatherer in the Cairn came at the evocation of Dahut the White and the evil priests.

And that I was in ancient Ys.

Then the mirage quivered again and was gone. The dusk blotted out Carnac. I looked down upon Cyclopean walls against which long combers broke, shouting. They were enormously thick and high here, these walls; jutting out into the ocean like the prow of some ship of stone.

They lessened as they fell back toward the mainland through shallows which were bare sands when the tides ebbed.

I knew the city well. A fair city. Temples and palaces of sculptured stone with tiled and painted roofs red and orange and blue and green adorned it, and dwellings of lacquered wood utterly unlike the rude homes of my clan. It was filled with hidden gardens where fountains whispered and strange flowers bloomed. It was clustered, this city, between the wave-beaten walls as though the land upon which it stood was a deck of a ship and the walls the bulwarks. They had built it on a peninsula that stretched far out into the sea. The sea menaced it always, and always was held at bay by the walls, and by sorceries of Ys. Out of the city ran a wide road, straight over the sands to the mainland, and straight to the evil heart of the circling monoliths—where my people were sacrificed.

They who had built Ys were not my people. It was not they who had raised the stones of Carnac. Our grandmothers had said their grandmothers had told that long and long ago the people who built Ys had come sailing in strangely shaped ships, fortified the neck of the peninsula and settled there; and now we were in thrall to them; and they had taken Carnac and on the trunk of its dark ritual had grafted branches that bore the fruit of unnameable evil. I had come to Ys to lop those branches. And if I lived thereafter to put ax to trunk.

Bitterly did I hate these people of Ys, sorcerers and sorceresses all, and I had a plan to destroy them, one and all; to end the dreadful rites of the Alkar-Az and rid the temple forever of That which came in the wake of torment and death to my own people at the summoning of Dahut and the priests of Ys. I thought all that while knowing at one and the same time I was the Lord of Carnac and also Alan Caranac who had allowed himself to be caught by the wiles of the Demoiselle de Keradel, and was seeing only what she was willing him to see. At least, Alan Caranac knew that, but the Lord of Carnac did not.

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I HEARD the sweetness of a lute touched lightly; heard laughter like little heartless waves, and a voice —the voice of Dahut!

"Lord of Carnac, the dusk hides your lands. And have you not looked long enough on the sea, beloved? *Her* arms are cold—*mine* are warm."

I turned from the window, and for a moment ancient Carnac and ancient Ys seemed fantastic dream. For I was still in that tower from which I had thought the dancing shadows had thrust me. It was the same room; rose-lighted, octagonal, hung with the same tapestries in which green shadows waxed and waned; and upon a low stool sat Dahut, lute in hand, draped in the same sea-green web, her braids falling between her breasts.

I said:

"You are true witch, Dahut—to trap me like that again." And turned to the window to look upon the familiar lights of New York.

But that was not what I said, nor did I turn. I found myself walking straight toward her, and instead of the words I had thought to speak, I heard myself saying:

"You are of the sea, Dahut . . . and if your arms are warmer, your heart is as merciless."

And suddenly I knew that whether dream or illusion, this *was* Ys, and whilst the part of me that was Alan Caranac could see through the eyes, hear with the ears, and read the thought of this other part of me which was Lord of Carnac, I was powerless to control him and he was unaware of me. Yet I must abide by what he did. Something like an actor watching himself go through a play—but with the quite important difference that I knew neither the lines nor the situations. A most disturbing condition. I had a swift thought that Dahut ought either to have placed me under better hypnotic control or passed me up entirely. I felt a faint disappointment in her. That idea shot out of my mind like a rocket.

She looked up at me, and her eyes were wet. She loosed her braids and covered her face with her hair and she wept behind its curtain. I said, coldly:

"Many women have wept as you do . . . for men you have slain, Dahut."

She said:

"Since you rode into Ys from Carnac a month ago, I have had no peace. There is a flame in my heart that eats it. What to me or to you are the lovers who have gone before, since until you came never did I know love? I kill no more—I have banished my shadows—"

I asked, grimly:

"What if they do not accept their banishment?"

She threw back her hair; looked at me, sharply:

"What do you mean by that?"

I answered:

"I make serfs. I train them to serve me well and to acknowledge no other master. I feed and house them. Suppose, then, I feed them no longer, deny them shelter. Banish them. What will my hungry, homeless serfs do, Dahut?"

She said, incredulously:

"You mean my shadows may rebel against me?" She laughed, then her eyes narrowed, calculatingly: "Still—there is something in what you say. And what I have made, I can—unmake."

I thought that a sighing went around the room, and that for an instant the hues in the tapestries shifted more rapidly. If so, Dahut paid no heed, sat pensive. She said, musingly:

"After all, they do not love me—

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my shadows. They do my bidding—but they do not love me . . . who made them. No."

I who was Alan Caranac smiled at this, but then I reflected that the I who was Lord of Carnac quite evidently took these shadows entirely seriously, disconcertingly as matters-of-fact . . . as Dick had!

SHE stood up, threw white arms around my neck, and the fragrance of her that was like some secret flower of the sea rocked me, and at her touch desire flamed through me. She said languorously:

"Beloved . . . who have swept my heart clean of all other loves . . . who have awakened me to love . . . why will you not love me?"

I said, thickly:

"I do love you, Dahut—but I do not trust you. How can I know your love will last . . . or that the time may not come when I, too, become a shadow . . . as did those others who loved you?"

She answered, lips close to mine:

"I have told you. I loved none of them."

I said: "There was one you loved."

She swayed back, looked deep into my eyes, her own sparkling:

"You mean the child; you are jealous, Alain — and therefore I know you love me. I will send away the child. Nay—if you desire, she shall be slain."

And now I felt cold fury stifle all desire for this woman who held life so lightly against passion that she would turn her hand even against the daughter she had borne. Ah, but that was no secret even in Carnac. I had seen the little Dahut, violet-eyed, milk-white with the moon-fire in her veins—no mistaking who had given *her* birth, even had her mother denied her. But I mastered the fury—after all, it was but what I had expected, and it steeled me in my determination.

"No," I shook my head. "What would that mean but that you had tired of her—as you tired of her father—as you tired of all your lovers?"

She whispered, desperately, and if I ever saw true madness of love in a woman's face it was there in hers: "What can I do! Alain—what can I do to gain your trust?"

I said: "When the moon wanes, then is the feast of the Alkar-Az. Then you will summon the Gatherer in the Cairn—and then will many of my people die under the mauls of the priests and many more be swallowed by the Blackness.

"Promise me you will not summon —It. Then I will trust you."

She shrank away, lips white; she whispered: "I cannot do that. It would mean the end of Ys. It would mean the end of—me. The Gatherer would summon—me . . . ask anything else, beloved . . . but that I *cannot* do."

Well, I had expected her refusal; had hoped for it. I said:

"Then give me the keys to the sea-gates."

She stiffened; I read doubt, suspicion, in her eyes; and when she spoke, softness had gone from her voice.

She said, slowly:

"Now why do you ask for them, Lord of Carnac? They are the very sign and symbol of Ys. They are—Ys. They were forged by the sea-god who led my forefathers here long and long and long ago. Never have they been in any hands except those of the Kings of Ys.

"Never may they be in any hands except those of a King of Ys. Why do you ask for—them?"

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AH—but this was the crisis. This was the moment toward which for long I had been working. I caught her up in my arms, tall woman that she was, and held her cupped in them. I pressed my lips to hers, and I felt her quiver and her arms lock round my neck and her teeth bruise my mouth. I threw back my head and roared laughter. I said:

"You yourself have said it, Dahut. I ask because they are the symbol of Ys. Because they are—you. Perhaps because I would hold them against any change of heart of yours, White Witch. Perhaps as a shield against your shadows. Double your guards at the sea-gates, if you will, Dahut. But—" again I held her close and set my mouth against hers—"I kiss you never again until those keys are in my hands."

She said, falteringly:

"Hold me so another moment, Alain . . . and you shall have the keys . . . hold me . . . it is as though my soul were loosed from bondage . . . you shall have the keys . . ."

She bent her head and I felt her lips over my heart. And black hate of her and red lust for her fought within me.

She said: "Put me down."

And when I had done this she looked at me long with soft and misty eyes; and she said again:

"You shall have the keys, beloved. But I must wait until my father is asleep. I shall see to it that he goes early to sleep. And the keys of Ys shall be in the hands of a King of Ys—for King of Ys you shall be, my own dear Lord. Now wait here for me—"

She was gone.

I walked to the window and looked out upon the sea. The storm had broken, was rising to tempest strength and the long combers were battering, battering at the stone prow of Ys, and I could feel the tower tremble in the blast. Blast and sea matched the exultation in my heart.

I KNEW that hours had passed, and that I had eaten and had drunk. There was confused memory of a great hall where I had sat among gay people close to a dais where was the old King of Ys, and at his right Dahut, and at his left a white-robed, yellow-eyed priest around whose forehead was a narrow band of gold and at whose girdle the sacred maul with which the breasts of my own people were beaten in before the Alkar-Az. He had watched me, malevolently. And the King had grown sleepy, nodding . . . nodding . . .

But now I was in Dahut's tower. The storm was stronger and so were the surge and beat of waves on the stone prow of Ys. The rosy light was dim, and the shadows in the green hangings were motionless. Yet I thought that they were closer to the surface; were watching me.

In my hands were three slender bars of sea-green metal, strangely notched and serrated; upon each the symbol of the trident. The longest was three times the space between my index finger and wrist, the shortest the length of my hand.

They hung from a bracelet, a thin band of silver in which was set a black stone bearing in crimson the trident symbol that was the summoning name of the sea-god. They were the keys of Ys, given by the sea-god to those who had built Ys.

The keys to the sea-gates!

And Dahut stood before me. She was like a girl in her robe of white, her slender feet bare, hair of silvery gold flowing over exquisite shoulders and

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the rosy light weaving a little aureole around her head. I who was Alan Caranac thought: *She looks like a saint.* But I who was Lord of Carnac knew nothing of saints, and only thought:

How can I kill this woman, evil as I know her to be!

She said, simply: "Now can you trust, Lord of me?"

I dropped the keys and set my hands on her shoulders: "Yes."

She raised her lips to me, like a child. I felt pity—against all my knowledge of what she truly was and against my will I felt pity for her. So I lied. I said: "Let the keys stay where they are, white flower. In the morning, before your father awakens, you shall take them back to him. It was but a test, sweet white flame."

She looked at me, gravely:

"If you wish it, so shall it be done. But there is no need. Tomorrow you shall be King of Ys."

I felt a little shock go through me, and pity fled. If that promise meant anything it meant that she was going to kill her father as remorselessly as she had offered to kill her child. She said, dreamily:

"He grows old. And he is weary. He will be glad to go. And with these keys—I give you all of myself. With them—I lock behind me all life that I have lived. I come to you—virgin. Those I have slain I forget, as you will forget. And their shadows shall—cease to be."

Again I heard that sighing whisper go round the room, but she did not—or if she did, she gave it no heed.

And suddenly she clasped me in her arms, and her lips clung to mine . . . nor were they virginal . . . and the desire of her swept like wild-fire through me . . .

I HAD not been asleep. Knowing what I must do, I had not dared to sleep though sleep pressed heavy on my eyes. I had lain, listening to the breathing of Dahut, waiting for her to sink into the deepest slumber. Yet I must have dozed, for suddenly I became conscious of a whispering close to my ear, and I knew that the whisper had not just begun.

I lifted my head. The rosy light was dim. Beside me was Dahut, one white arm and breast uncovered, hair a silken net upon her pillow.

The whispering continued; grew more urgent. I looked about the room. It was thronged with shadowy shapes that swayed and shifted like shadows in the waves. Upon the floor where I had thrown them lay the keys of Ys, the black pebble glimmering.

I looked again at Dahut—and looked and looked again. For over her eyes was a shadow as though of a hand, and over her lips another such shadow, and upon her breast was a shadow like a hand upon her heart, and around knees and ankles were other shadowy hands, clasping them like fetters.

I slipped from the bed; dressed swiftly and threw my cloak over my shoulders. I picked up the keys.

One last look I took at Dahut—and almost my resolution broke. Witch or not—she was too fair to kill . . .

The whispering grew fiercer; it threatened; it urged me on, implacably. I looked at Dahut no more—I could not. I passed out of her chamber—and I felt the shadows go along with me, wavering before and around and after me.

I knew the way to the sea-gates. It led through the palace, thence underground to the vault at the end of the prow of stone against which the waves were thundering.

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I could not think clearly—my thoughts were shadows—I was a shadow walking with shadows . . .

THE shadows were hurrying me, whispering . . . what were they whispering? That nothing could harm me . . . nothing stop me . . . but I must hurry . . . hurry.

The shadows were like a cloak, covering me.

I came upon a guard. He stood beside the passage I must take from the palace into the underground way. He stood there, as in dream, staring vacantly, staring through me, as though I, too, were but a shadow. The shadows whispered—"Kill." I thrust dagger through him, and went on.

I came out of that passage into the anteroom of the vault of the gates. There was a man there, coming out of the vault. It was the white-robed priest with the yellow eyes. To him, at least, I was no shadow.

He stared at me and at the keys I held as though I were a demon. Then he rushed toward me, maul upraised, lifting a golden whistle to his lips to summon aid. The shadows swept me forward, and before it could touch his lips I had thrust my dagger through his heart.

And now the gate of the vault was before me. I took the smallest key, and at its touch in the slot that gate drew open.

And again the shadows crowded before and around, and pushed me on.

There were two guards there. One I killed before he could draw weapon. I threw myself on the other, throttling him before he could cry alarm.

I thought that as we writhed the shadows wound themselves around him, smotheringly. At any rate, he soon lay dead.

I went on to the sea-gates. They were of the same metal as the keys; immense; ten times my height at the least, twice again as wide; so massive that it did not seem that they could have been forged by the hands of men—that they were indeed the gift of the sea-god as the people of Ys had told us.

I found the slits. The shadows were whispering . . . first I must thrust in the larger key and turn . . . now the smaller and turn . . . and now I must cry out the name upon the pebble . . . once and twice and thrice. I cried that name.

The massive valves shuddered: they began to open—inward. A thin sheet of water hissed through the opening, striking the opposite side of the vault like a sword.

And now the shadows were whispering to me to flee . . . quickly . . . quickly . . .

Before I could reach the doorway of the vault the split between the opening valves was a roaring cataract. Before I could reach the passage a wave struck me. On its crest was the body of the priest, arms stretched out to me as though in death he was trying to drag me down . . . down under the smother . . .

And now I was on a horse, racing over the wide road to Carnac through the howling tempest. In my arms was a child, a girl whose violet eyes were open wide, and blank with terror. And on and on I raced, with the waves reaching out for me, clamoring behind me.

Above the tumult of wind and waves, another tumult from Ys—the crashing of its temples and palaces, the rape of its sea-walls and the death-cry of its people blended into one sustained note of despair.

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CHAPTER X.

AND OUT OF DAHUT'S TOWER.

I LAY, eyes shut, but wide awake. I had battled back into this awakening, wrestling for mastery over another self that had stubbornly asserted its right to be. I had won, and the other self had retreated into my memories of Ys. But the memories were vivid and he was as strong as they; he was entrenched among them and he would live as long as they lived; waiting his chance. I was as spent as though that fight had been physical; and in my mind the Lord of Carnac and Alan Caranac and Dahut of ancient Ys and the Demoiselle de Keradel danced a witches' dance, passing in and out of each other, shifting from one to another—like the girls in the "House of Heart's Desire."

Time had passed between the moment of awakening and the moment when the death cry of Ys had smitten me in my flight over the sands. I knew that. But whether it had been minutes or millenniums I did not know. And other things had happened which I did not like remembering.

I opened my eyes. I had thought that I had been lying on a soft bed. I was not. I was standing fully dressed beside a window in a room of dim rosy light; a room like a turret . . . with octagonal walls covered by sea-green tapestries in which furtive shadows moved.

And suddenly that other self became alert, and I heard a far off clamor of waves racing toward me . . .

I turned my head quickly and looked out of the window. There was no stormy sea, no spuming combers beating upon great walls. I looked down upon bridge-bound East River and the lights of New York; looked and fed upon them, drawing strength and sanity from them.

Slowly I turned from the window. Upon the bed was Dahut. She was asleep, one white arm and breast uncovered and her hair a silken net upon her pillow. She lay there, straight and slim as a sword, and in her sleep she smiled.

No shadowy hands held her. Around her wrist was the bracelet, and the black stone was like an unwinking eye, watching me. I wondered whether her eyes under the long curling lashes were also watching me. Her breasts rose and fell, like the slow lift and fall of waves in a slumbering sea. Her mouth, with the kiss of the archaic upon her lips, was peaceful. She was like a soul of the sea over which tempest had passed, leaving it sleeping. She was very lovely . . . and there was desire for her in my heart, and there was fear of her. I took a step toward her . . . to kill her now while she lay asleep and helpless . . . to set my hands around her throat and choke the black life out of the white witch . . . to kill her, ruthlessly, as she had killed . . .

I could not do that. Nor could I awaken her. The fear of her stood like a barrier against awakening. The desire for her stood like another barrier against the urge to slay her. I drew back, through the window and out upon the terrace.

I WAITED there for a moment, considering, watching Dahut's chamber for any movement. Witchcraft might be superstition—but what Dahut had twice done to me measured up fully to any definition of it. And I thought of what had happened to Dick—and of her calm confession about that. She had told the truth there, whether she had brought his death

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about by suggestion or by actual shadow. My own experiences had been too similar to doubt that. She had killed Dick Ralston, and those other three. And how many more only she knew.

I gave up any idea of slinking through her turret and trying to find the hidden door to the great room from whence had come the shadowy singing. Maybe the shadows wouldn't be as helpful as they had been back in ancient Ys. Also, there was the antechamber of the elevators.

The truth was that the cold fear I felt of the Demoiselle seemed to paralyze all trust in myself. I was too vulnerable to her on her own picked field. And if I killed her, what possible reason could I offer? Ralston's death, shadows, witchcraft? The best I could expect was the madhouse. How could I prove such absurdities? And if I awakened her and demanded release—well, I couldn't see that working either. New York and ancient Ys were still too close together in my mind—and something whispered that the way I had taken in Ys was still the best way. And that was to go while she slept.

I walked to the edge of the terrace and looked over its coping. The next terrace was twenty feet below. I didn't dare risk the drop. I examined the wall. It had bricks jutting out here and there that I thought I could manage. I took off my shoes and hung them around my neck by the laces. I slid over the coping and with an occasional slip or two I landed on the lower terrace. Its windows were open and there was the sound of heavy sleeping from within. A clock rang two and the breathing stopped. A singularly formidable woman came to the casements, looked out, and slammed them shut. It occurred to me that this was no place for a hatless, coatless, shoeless fugitive to ask sanctuary. So I did the same crawl down to the next terrace, and that was all boarded up.

I climbed to the next, and that too was boarded. By this time my shirt was a wreck, my trousers ripped here and there, and my feet bare. I realized that I was rapidly getting in such shape that it would take all my eloquence to get away no matter what lucky break might come. I looked up at Dahut's terrace, and I thought the light was streaming more brightly from her windows. I hastily slipped over the coping and to the next terrace.

There was a brilliantly lighted room. Four men were playing poker at a table literally loaded with bottles. I had overturned a big potted bush. I saw the men stare at the window. There was nothing to do but walk in and take a chance. I did so.

THE man at the head of the table was fat, with twinkling little blue eyes and a cigar sticking up out of the corner of his mouth; next him was one who might have been an old-time banker; a lank and sprawling chap with a humorous mouth and a melancholy little man with an aspect of indestructible indigestion.

The fat man said: "Do you all see what I do? All voting yes will take a drink."

They all took a drink and the fat man said: "The ayes have it."

The banker said: "If he didn't drop out of an airplane, then he's a human fly."

The fat man asked: "Which was it, stranger?"

I said: "I climbed."

The melancholy man said: "I knew it. I always said this house had no morals."

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The lanky man stood up and pointed a warning finger at me: "Which way did you climb? Up or down?"

"Down," I said.

"Well," he said, "if you came down it's all right so far with us."

I asked, puzzled: "What difference does it make?"

He said: "A hell of a lot of difference. We all live underneath here except the fat man, and we're all married."

The melancholy man said: "Let this be a lesson to you, stranger. Put not your trust in the presence of woman nor in the absence of man."

The lanky man said: "A sentiment, James, that deserves another round. Pass the rye, Bill."

The fat man passed it. I suddenly realized what a ridiculous figure I must make. I said: "Gentlemen, I can give you my name and credentials, which you can verify by phone if necessary. I admit, I prefer not to. But if you will let me get out of this place you will be compounding neither misdemeanor nor felony nor any other crime. And it would be useless to tell you the truth, for you wouldn't believe me."

The lank man mused: "How often have I heard that plea of not guilty before, and in precisely those phrases. Stand right where you are, stranger, till the jury decides. Let us view the scene of the crime, gentlemen."

They walked out to the terrace, poked at the overturned plant, scanned the front of the building, and returned. They looked at me curiously.

The lanky man said: "Either he has a hell of a nerve to take a climb like that to save the lady's reputation—or Daddy just naturally scared him worse than death."

The melancholy man, James, said bitterly: "There's a way to tell if it's nerve. Let him stack a couple of hands against that fat pirate."

The fat man, Bill, said, indignantly: "I'll play with no man who wears his shoes around his neck."

The lanky man said: "A worthy sentiment, Bill. Another round on it." They drank.

I slipped on my shoes. This was doing me good. It was about as far as possible from ancient Ys and the Demoiselle. I said:

"Even under a torn shirt, ripped pants and footless socks a fearless heart may beat. Count me in."

The lanky man said: "A peerless sentiment. Gentlemen, a round in which the stranger joins." We drank, and I needed it.

I said: "What I'm playing for is a pair of socks, a clean shirt, a pair of pants, an overcoat, a hat and a free and unquestioned exit."

The melancholy man said: "What we're playing for is your money. And if you lose you get out of here how you can in the clothes you've got on."

I said: "Fair enough."

I opened, and the lanky man wrote something on a blue chip and showed it to me before he tossed it into the pot. I read: "Half a sock." The others solemnly marked their chips and the game was on. I won and lost. There were many worthy sentiments and many rounds. At four o'clock I had won my outfit and release. Bill's clothes were too big for me, but the others went out and came back with what was needful.

They took me downstairs. They put me in a taxi and held their hands over their ears as I told the taxi man where to go.

That was a quartette of good scouts if ever there was one. When I was unsteadily undressing at the Club

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a lot of chips fell out of my pockets. They were marked: "Half a shirt," "One seat of pants," "A pant leg," "One hat brim," and so on and so on.

I steered a wavering nor' nor' east course to the bed. I'd forgotten all about Ys and Dahut. Nor did I dream of them.

CHAPTER XI.

DAHUT SENDS A SOUVENIR.

IT was different when I woke up. I was stiff and sore and it took about three pick-me-ups to steady the floor. The memories of the Demoiselle Dahut and of Ys were all too acute, and they had a nightmarish edge to them. That flight from her tower, for example. Why hadn't I stayed and fought it out? I hadn't even the excuse of Joseph fleeing from Potiphar's wife. I knew I had been no Joseph. Not that this troubled my conscience particularly, but the facts remained that I had made a most undignified exit and that each time I had met Dahut—with the problematical exception of Ys—she had worsted me.

Hell, the plain truth was that I had run away in terror and had let down Bill and let down—Helen. At that moment I hated Dahut as much as ever had the Lord of Carnac.

I managed a breakfast and called up Bill. Helen answered. She said with poisonous solicitude: "Why, darling, you must have traveled all night to get back so early. Where did you go?"

I was still pretty edgy and I answered, curtly: "Three thousand miles and five thousand years away."

She said: "How interesting. Not all by yourself, surely."

I thought: *Damn all women!* and asked: "Where's Bill?"

She said: "Darling, you have a guilty sound. You weren't alone, were you?"

I said: "No. And I didn't like the trip. And if you're thinking what I'm thinking—yes, I'm guilty. And I don't like that either."

When she spoke again, her voice had changed, filled with real concern and a little frightened: "You mean that—about three thousand miles and centuries away?"

I said: "Yes."

Again she was silent; then: "With the—Demoiselle?"

"Yes."

She said, furiously: "The damned witch! Oh, if you'd only been with me . . . I could have saved you all of that."

I said: "Maybe. But not on some other night. Sooner or later it had to come, Helen. Why that is true I don't know—yet. But it is true." For suddenly I had remembered that strange thought which had come to me—that I had drunk of the Demoiselle's evil long and long ago—and must drink again; and I knew that it had been a true thought.

I repeated: "It had to be. And it is done."

That I knew was a lie, and so did Helen. She said, a bit piteously:

"It's just begun, Alan."

I had no answer to that. She said: "I'd give my life to help you, Alan—" Her voice broke; then, hurriedly: "Bill said to wait at the Club for him. He'll be there about four." She rang off.

HARDLY had she done so than a boy brought me a letter. On the envelope was a tiny imprint of the trident. I opened it. It was in the Breton:

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My elusive—friend! Whatever I may be—I am still a woman and therefore curious. Are you as insubstantial as—shadows? Are doors and walls nothing to you? You did not seem so—last night. I await you with all eagerness tonight—to learn.

DAHUT.

There was subtle threat in every line of that. Especially the part about the shadows. My anger rose. I wrote:

Ask your shadows. Perhaps they are no more faithful to you now than they were in Ys. As for tonight—I am otherwise engaged.

I signed it Alan Caranac and sent it off by messenger. Then I waited for Bill. I drew some comfort from the thought that the Demoiselle evidently knew nothing of how I had escaped from her turret. That, at least, meant that her powers, whatever they might be, were limited. Also, if those damned shadows had any reality except in the minds of those who strayed into her web of suggestion, the idea I had planted might bring about some helpful confusion in her menage.

Promptly at four Bill came in. He looked worried. I laid the whole thing before him from start to finish, not even passing up the poker party. He read the Demoiselle's letter and my reply. He looked up:

"I don't blame you for last night, Alan. But I rather wish you had answered this—differently."

"You mean accepted it?"

He nodded: "Yes, you're pretty well forewarned now. You might temporize. Play her along a bit . . . make her believe you love her . . . pretend you would like to join her and de Keradel."

"Sit in on their game?"

He hesitated, then said: "For a little while."

I laughed: "Bill, as for being forewarned, if that dream of Ys she conjured up means anything, it means Dahut is a damned sigh better forewarned than I am. Also, much better forearmed. As for temporizing with or playing her—she'd see through me in no time, or her father would. There's nothing to do but fight."

He asked: "How can you fight—shadows?"

I said: "It would take me days to tell you all the charms, counter-charms, exorcisms and what not that man has devised for that sole purpose—Cro-Magnons and without doubt the men before them and perhaps even the half-men before *them*. Sumerians, Egyptians, Phoenicians, the Greek and the Romans, the Celts, the Gauls and every race under the sun, known and forgotten, put their minds to it.

"But there is only one way to defeat the shadow sorcery—and that is not to believe in it."

He said: "Once I would have agreed with you—and not so long ago. Now the idea seems to me to resemble that of getting rid of a cancer by denying you have it."

I said impatiently: "If you had tried a good dose of hypnotism on Dick, counter-suggestion, he'd probably be alive today."

He replied, quietly: "I did. There were reasons I didn't want de Keradel to know it. Nor you. I tried it to the limit, and it did no good."

And as I digested this, he asked, slyly: "You don't believe in them, do you, Alan—in the shadows? I mean in their reality?"

"No," I answered—and wished it were the truth.

"Well," he said, "your incredulity doesn't seem to have helped you much last night!"

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I WENT to the window and looked out. I wanted to tell him that there was another way to stop the shadow sorcery. The *only* sure way. Kill the witch who did it. But what was the use? I'd had my chance to do that and lost it. And I knew that if I could relive the night—I would not kill her. I said:

"That's true, Bill. But it was because my disbelief was not strong enough. Dahut weakens it. It's why I want to keep away from her."

He laughed: "I'm still reminded of the cancer patient—if he could only have believed strongly enough that he had none, it couldn't have killed him. Well, if you won't go you won't. Now I've some news for you. De Keradel has a big place on Rhode Island. I found out about it yesterday. It's an isolated spot, hell gone from nowhere and right on the ocean. He keeps a yacht—sea-going. He must be almighty rich. De Keradel is up there now, which is why you had it all to yourself with the Demoiselle. Lowell sent yesterday for McCann and McCann is coming in tonight to talk things over. It's Lowell's idea, and mine, too, to have him go up and scout around de Keradel's place. Find out what he can from the people about. Lowell, by the way, has gotten over his panic. He's—rather deadly in his hatred for de Keradel, and that includes the Demoiselle. I told you he is all wrapped up in Helen. Thinks of her as a daughter."

I said: "But that's a damned good idea, Bill. De Keradel spoke of some experiment he is carrying out. That's undoubtedly where he's working. His laboratory. McCann might find out a lot."

Bill nodded: "Why not come up and sit in?"

I was about to accept when suddenly I had the strongest feeling that I must not. A tingling warning of danger, like some deep hidden alarm going off. I shook my head: "Can't do it, Bill. I've got work to do. You can tell me about it tomorrow."

He got up. "Thinking you might change your mind about that rendezvous with the Demoiselle?"

"No chance," I answered. "Give my love to Helen. And tell her I don't mean maybe. Tell her I'm taking no more journeys. She'll understand."

I did spend that afternoon working; and that night. Now and then I had an uncomfortable feeling that some one was watching me. Bill called up next day to say that McCann had gone to Rhode Island. Helen got on the phone and said she had received my message and would I come up that night. Her voice was warm and sweet and somehow—cleansing. I wanted to go, but that deep hidden alarm was shrilling, peremptorily. I apologized—rather awkwardly. She asked:

"You haven't it in your stubborn head that you'd carry some witch taint with you, have you?"

I said: "No. But I might carry danger to you."

She said: "I'm not afraid of the Demoiselle. I know how to fight her, Alan."

I asked: "What do you mean by that?"

She said, furiously: "Damn your stupidity!" And hung up before I could speak.

I WAS puzzled, and I was troubled. The inexplicable warning to keep away from Dr. Lowell's and from Helen was insistent, not to be disregarded. At last I threw my notes into a bag with some clothes and sought

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shelter in a little hideaway hotel I knew, after having sent Bill a note telling him where he could find me but warning him not to tell Helen. I said I had the strongest reasons for this temporary obscuration. So I had, even though I didn't know what they were. That was Tuesday. On Friday I went back to the Club.

I found two notes from the Demoiselle. One must have come just after I had left for the hideout. It read: "There was a debt from you to me. In part, you have paid it. There is not nor ever was a debt from me to you. Beloved—come to me tonight."

The other had been delivered the day after. It read: "I go to join my father in his work. When next I call you see to it that you come. I have sent a souvenir that you may not forget this."

I read and re-read those notes, wondering. In the first there was appeal, longing; the kind of letter any woman might write to some reluctant lover. In the other was menace. Uneasily, I paced the floor; then called up Bill. He said:

"So you're back. I'll be right down."

He was there in half an hour. He seemed a little on edge. I asked:

"Anything new?"

He sat down and said casually, a bit too casually: "Well, yes. She's pinned one on me."

I said, dumbly: "Who's done what?"

He answered: "Dahut. She's pinned one of her shadows on me."

My feet and hands were suddenly cold and I felt a thin cord draw tight around my throat. The letter in which Dahut had spoken of the souvenir she was sending lay open before me, and I folded it. I said:

"Tell me about it, Bill."

He said: "Don't look so panicky, Alan. I'm not like Dick and the others. It won't handle me so easily. But I'm not saying it's exactly—companionable. By the way, do you see something at my right? Something like a bit of dark curtain—fluttering?"

He was keeping his eyes upon mine, but the effort of will he was making to do it was plain. They were a bit bloodshot. I looked, intently, and said: "No, Bill. I don't see a thing."

HE said: "I'll just shut my eyes, if you don't mind. Last night I came out of the hospital about eleven. There was a taxi at the curb, The driver was half asleep, hunched over the wheel. I opened the door and was about to get in when I saw some one—something—move in the far corner of the seat. The cab was fairly dark and I could not determine whether it was a man or a woman. I said: 'Oh, I beg your pardon. I thought the taxi idle.' And I stepped back.

"The taxi man had awakened. He touched my shoulder. He said: 'O. K., boss, get in. I ain't got anybody.' I said: 'Sure you have.' He flashed on the inside light. The cab was empty. He said: 'I been waitin' here an hour, boss, on a chance. Just dozin'. Nobody got in. You seen a shadow.'

"I stepped into the cab and told him where to take me. We had gone a couple of blocks when I thought some one was sitting beside me. Close to me. I had been looking straight ahead and turned quickly. I caught a glimpse of something dark between me and the window. Then—there was nothing, but I distinctly heard a faint rustling. Like a dry leaf being blown along a window in the night. Deliberately, I moved over to that side. We had gone another few blocks when I once more

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saw the movement at my left, and again there was a thin veil of deeper darkness between me and that window.

"The outline was that of a human body. And again as it flicked out I heard the rustling. And in that instant, Alan, I knew.

"I confess that I had a moment of pure panic. I called to the driver, about to tell him to take me back to the hospital. Then my nerve came back, and I told him to go ahead. I went into the house. I felt the shadow flitting with me as I entered. There was no one up. It companioned me, impalpable, incorporeal, glimpsed only by its movement, until I went to bed. It was with me through the night.

"I thought that like Dick's shadow it would go with the dawn. This one didn't. It was still there when I woke up. I waited until they'd all had breakfast—after all, Alan, a little playmate like that was nothing to introduce to the family, you know." He squinted at me sardonically.

I asked: "It's pretty bad then, Bill?"

He said: "I can get along with it—unless it gets worse."

I looked at my watch. It was five o'clock. I said: "Bill, have you got de Keradel's address?"

Bill said: "Yes," and gave it to me. I said: "Bill, don't worry any more. I have an idea. Forget about the shadow as much as you can. If you haven't anything important, go home and go to sleep. Or would you rather sleep here a bit?"

He said: "I'd rather lie down here for a bit. The damned thing doesn't seem to bother me so much here."

Bill lay down on the bed. I unfolded the Demoiselle's last letter and read it again. I called up the telegraph company and found the nearest village to the de Keradel place. I got the telegraph office there on the phone and asked them if there was telephone communication with Dr. de Keradel. They said there was, but that it was a private wire. I said that was all right, I only wanted to dictate a telegram to the Demoiselle de Keradel. They asked—"the what?" I answered "Miss de Keradel." I felt ironic amusement at that innocent "Miss." They said they could take it.

I dictated: "Your souvenir most convincing, but embarrassing. Take it back and I surrender unconditionally. Am at your command at any moment when assured this is done."

I sat down and looked at Bill. He was asleep, but not very happily. I was wide awake but not very happy either. I loved Helen, and I wanted Helen. And I felt that what I had just done had lost Helen to me forever.

The clock struck six. There was a ring on the telephone. It was long distance. The man to whom I had dictated the telegram spoke: "Miss de Keradel got the message O.K. Here's one from her. It reads: 'Souvenir withdrawn but returnable.' You know what it means?"

I answered: "Sure." If he had expected me to go into details, he was disappointed. I hung up the phone.

I went over to Bill. He was sleeping more quietly. I sat watching him. In half an hour he was breathing peacefully, his face untroubled. I gave him another hour and then awakened him.

"Time to get up, Bill."

He sat up and looked at me blankly. He looked around the room, and went over to the window. He stood there a minute or two, then turned to me.

"God, Alan! The shadow's gone!"

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK.

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WOMEN of DARING
by STOOKIE ALLEN
ORIENTAL JOAN OF ARC
Inspired to take up the sword for her country, Yoshiko Kawashima played so heroic a part in the establishment of Manchoukuo that her countrymen now believe her to be blest by the gods.
DAUGHTER OF A MANCHURIAN PRINCE, THE ATTRACTIVE, SLOE-EYED YOSHIKO WAS REARED IN THE ISLES OF THE RISING SUN AS A JAPANESE. COMMANDED BY HER FATHER ON HIS DEATHBED TO "FREE MANCHURIA" THE YOUNG GIRL DISCARDED HER KIMONOS, CUT HER RAVEN TRESSES, AND FARED FORTH BOLDLY TO THE LAND OF HER BIRTH. LONG BEFORE THERE WAS ANY FIGHTING, SHE SERVED AS A JAPANESE SPY IN THE GUISE OF A YOUNG MAN.
YOSHIKO'S RESCUE OF HENRY PU YI'S CONSORT FROM TIENTSIN, CHINA, WAS AUDACIOUS. THE EMPRESS-TO-BE OF MANCHOUKUO HAD FAILED TO ESCAPE WITH HER HUSBAND, THE ONE TIME BOY EMPEROR OF CHINA, AND SHE WAS KEPT UNDER CLOSE GUARD IN HER HOME. BUT THE INTREPID GIRL SPY, POSING AS A TAXI-DRIVER, OUTWITTED THE GUARDS AND ABDUCTED HER.

A True Story in Pictures Every Week

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BEGINNING HER MILITARY CAREER AT THE HEAD OF A REGIMENT OF MANCHOUKUON RECRUITS, YOSHIKO SO INSPIRED THE GREEN AND NONE TOO WILLING TROOPERS THAT THEY FOUGHT LIKE DEMONS, KILLING AND CAPTURING HUNDREDS OF BANDITS AND CHINESE REGULARS.
PROMOTED TO THE COMMAND OF AN ARMY ASSIGNED TO THE TASK OF CLEARING ENEMY FORCES FROM THE MOUNTAIN FASTNESSES OF JEHOL, SHE FOUGHT THROUGH TO THE GREAT WALL. THE STRUGGLE WAS MADE EXTREMELY HAZARDOUS BY THE SUB-ZERO COLD AND THE SNIPER NESTS THAT HAD TO BE FERRETED OUT OF ROCKY STRONG-HOLDS.
HER MISSION FULFILLED, GENERAL KAWASHIMA EXHORTED HER SOLDIERS LIKE JOAN OF OLD, SAYING: "BY THE AID OF NIPPON, COUNTRY OF OUR BROTHERS, HIS MAJESTY PU YI NOW RULES OVER MANCHOUKUO AS A LIVING BUDDHA.
REVERED AS A NATIONAL HEROINE, YOSHIKO HAS NOW PUT ASIDE HER SWORD TO DEVOTE HERSELF TO THE ARTS OF PEACE. BUT SHE CONTINUES TO ENGAGE IN MYSTERIOUS ASSIGNMENTS FROM HER GOVERNMENT, AND HER ADMIRING COUNTRYMEN BELIEVE THAT IF HER SWORD IS DRAWN AGAIN IT WILL BE "FOR THE GLORY OF A UNITED ASIA."

Next Week: Gen. John A. Lejeune, Seagoing Soldier

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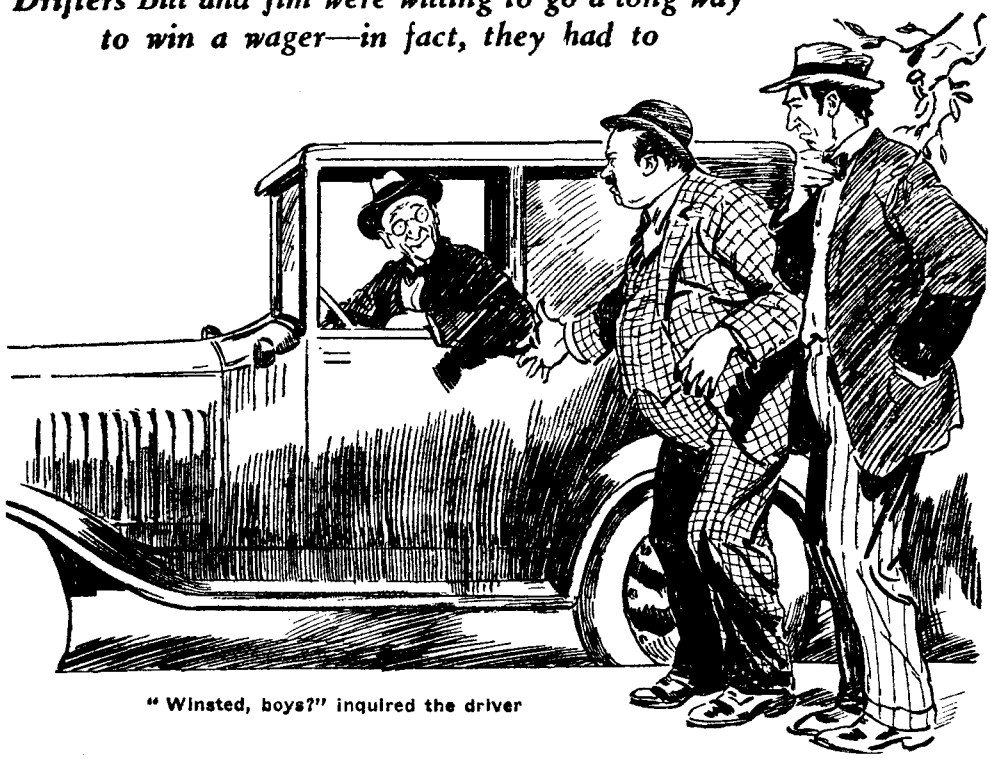
Drifters Bill and Jim were willing to go a long way to win a wager—in fact, they had to



"Winsted, boys?" inquired the driver

The Bet

JOHN H. THOMPSON

"I'D be willing to bet a hundred smackers I could hitch-hike from here to San Francisco and back in two weeks," declared Bill confidently.

"It's a bet," responded the shifty-eyed stranger with such alacrity that I knew Bill had made a horrible mistake somewhere in estimating the mileage. "Put up your hundred. We'll let the counterman here hold it for us."

"But—"

"Put up your hundred," insisted the stranger. He was fumbling around in his own pockets.

I was aware that Bill had a grand total of $3.35, so I knew that the bets would have to drop down out of high altitudes before any load of responsibility could be dumped on the shoulders of the counterman. To a plute $3.35 may be chicken feed but to a pair of old drifters two weeks behind in their room rent, it is big money.

"Where's your own hundred?" demanded Bill coolly. Bill's good at bluffing.

The stranger seemed a bit nonplussed. He hesitated uncertainly.

"Well, I haven't got a hundred smackers myself either," grinned Bill.

The counterman sociably came to the rescue. "Why not make a small bet, and—" he began.

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"I'm not going to hitch-hike out to San Francisco and back for a lousy dollar," declared Bill.

"That's what I was just trying to work out for you," explained the counterman. "You claimed that a guy can hitch-hike at the rate of twenty miles an hour anywhere at anytime."

"Of course he can," said Bill.

"Well, I say he can't," snapped the stranger. "You might cover ten miles in half an hour and then wait an hour to pick up a lift for the next ten miles. The law of averages is—"

"I'm counting on the law of averages," insisted Bill. "You—"

"Shut up, you don't know what you're talking about," growled the stranger.

"Now, fellows, be reasonable," interposed the counterman good naturedly. "There's no need of getting rough about it. This bird here," he jerked his thumb toward Bill, "claims that he can hitch-hike twenty miles in an hour, anywhere, anytime."

"Absolutely," Bill agreed.

"Well, on the other hand, this bird here," he jerked his thumb in the direction of his other customer, "claims that it can't be done."

"It can't," growled the stranger.

"That's that," chuckled the counterman. "Now why don't each of you put up your money and let this bird here," again he designated Bill, "hitch-hike to Winsted and back—that's ten miles away. If he isn't back here in an hour he loses the bet."

"Yeah, and how'll I know that he didn't walk around the block instead of going to Winsted?"

"That's O. K.," said the counterman. "Let him bring back a paper signed by the mayor of Winsted."

"Suppose the mayor isn't around," objected Bill.

"Well, make it any Winsted official," said the counterman. "Anybody at City Hall, so long as it is satisfactory proof that you've been to Winsted."

THE stranger hesitated. "I don't want to hang around in this town very long," he said. "On the other hand I want to make a fool out of this guy," he nodded, leering, toward Bill. A scar down the side of his face emphasized the leer.

"Put up $3," said Bill angrily, slamming all but 35 cents of our precious capital on the counter. "Put up $3 and I'll show you who's a fool."

"But I've got to get out of this town before—"

"Put up $3 and I bet that me and my pal, both of us, can go to Winsted and get back, hitch-hiking, in an hour." Bill was so angry and confident that he tossed good judgment overboard altogether. "You don't know what you are talking about," he added, by way of insult.

The stranger glanced about uneasily.

"Scared now, eh?" exulted Bill.

The stranger dug angrily into his pocket and tossed some money on the counter.

"It's 9:30 now," he snapped, glancing at the clock over the counter. "If you two guys aren't back here by 10:30 with a letter signed by a Winsted official, you'll find me and the money gone."

The counterman scooped in the money and laid it back of the cash register.

"O.K., the bet's on," he said.

"Which way is Winsted?" demanded Bill.

"Straight up Main Street and keep going along the State road," said the counterman.

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Bill hurriedly led the way out. I trailed along behind.

"You should have kissed your money good-by before we left," I informed him sadly. "That's a devil of a bet to make. It— "

But Bill wasn't listening. He stood on the curbing in front of the restaurant. Cars headed toward Winsted seemed few and far between at this hour of the day. Two passed by but the occupants ignored our thumbing. A muffled cry of derision sounded from inside the restaurant.

"Come on farther up the street," said Bill. "I can't keep a pleasant look on my face with that guy watching us —and a grouch doesn't stand any chance of picking up a ride."

He strolled along the street, stopping to signal every time we heard a car coming. Finally his efforts met with success. A small sedan drew up to the curb.

"Winsted, boys?" queried the driver.

Bill nodded happily and we hopped in.

"I'm in a hurry. Got to be in Winsted before 10 o'clock," said the driver sociably.

"That's O. K. by us," grinned Bill.

"It's a good road all the way. We'll be there by quarter to ten," said the driver

Bill slapped my knee enthusiastically. It looked as though we were getting the breaks.

"D'YOU ever have a sprained wrist?" asked the driver, indicating his left wrist which was wrapped in bandages.

Bill and I displayed the proper amount of sympathy.

"Makes it a bit harder driving," continued the man at the wheel, "but the way they make the cars nowadays one can drive with one finger almost."

We had left the town behind and were bowling merrily along a smooth concrete road. We passed a signpost.

"Winsted, five miles," said Bill gleefully. He glanced at the clock on the dashboard. It was only twenty minutes to ten. We were way ahead of schedule.

Suddenly there was a bang. The car swerved sharply, zig-zagged and came to a stop with brakes screeching.

"A blowout," groaned the driver. Bill and I groaned an echo.

"Dog-gone it, that's a new tire. I must have picked up a nail. This is a mess. I've got to be in Winsted at 10; and how in thunder am I going to change that tire with this wrist of mine?"

"Don't worry, stranger," said Bill, concealing his own disappointment. "Me and my pal will change it for you. You gave us a ride and we'll give you a hand."

For fifteen minutes we worked desperately against time changing the tire, but the stranger was so grateful that Bill and I were glad that we had stuck by him instead of grabbing a lift from any of the other cars which whizzed past.

"You fellows certainly have helped me out," declared the driver as we resumed the journey. "I'm late "—we all glanced at the clock on the dashboard — it was 10:15 — "but if it hadn't been for you two, I would have still been at the roadside back there."

He directed all his attention to the road, keeping his foot on the accelerator. We passed a sign which proclaimed that we were "entering Winsted."

"Where do you want to get off?" queried the driver.

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"At City Hall," said Bill promptly.

The stranger showed signs of interest. "That's where I'm going," he said. "That'll make it easy. Have you got some business at City Hall?"

"We want to see one of the officials," said Bill.

"I happen to be one of the councilmen; can I help you out?" said the driver.

"A councilman?" we chorused.

The stranger seemed gratified that his official position made such an impression.

"I'm a councilman and a member of the police commission," he said. "I—"

But Bill was hurriedly telling him the story of the bet. "And we've got to be back at the restaurant by 10:30 or we lose the bet," he concluded.

The car swerved to the curb.

"You fellows are in Winsted now. You've got about eleven minutes to get back to Torrington. Here." He fumbled in his pocked and drew out some papers. "Wait a second." A car was coming, headed in the opposite direction. The councilman tooted his horn wildly. The other driver looked, recognized him and stopped abruptly. "Say, Joe, these two fellows just did me a big favor. They've got to be back in Torrington by 10:30. Can you make it?"

THE other driver glanced at his wrist watch. "Sure thing, councilman, if they hurry."

"Quick, be getting out, boys," said the councilman. He hesitated for an instant and then started writing hurriedly in pencil on the margin of an official looking paper. "This happens to be the only official paper I've got," he said. "But I'll scribble a note on the margin that you were in Winsted and will sign it. After you collect your bet, give the paper to Joe there. Don't lose it." He leaned out toward the other driver.

"Take that over to Meade at the Torrington City Hall after these boys get through with it, will you, Joe? Tell Meade I'll phone him later."

"Yes, sir," was the response.

We grabbed the paper, thanked the councilman and jumped into the other car.

Just a shade over ten minutes later, Joe's car stopped in front of the restaurant. He dashed into the place. The counterman was standing in front of the cash register looking up at the clock. The scar-faced stranger was strumming impatiently on the counter.

"Here we are," shouted Bill.

The stranger looked at us in angry surprise.

"You haven't been to Winsted," he growled disagreeably. "Did you get a paper signed by some official?"

"We sure did," chuckled Bill.

"A fake, probably," he sneered. "Well, you lose the bet anyhow. You are two seconds late."

"It's just 10:30 now. They made it O. K.," contradicted the counterman.

"Let's see the paper first, and then we'll argue about the time," snapped the stranger. "No money will be paid over yet."

Bill triumphantly displayed the penciled note on the margin of the paper.

"Let's see it," demanded the stranger.

Bill pointed to the penciled words: "The bearers of this have just been in Winsted. Patrick McLaughlin, city councilman."

"How do I know but what it's a fake?" sneered the stranger. He started examining the paper.

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It fell to the floor. Bill and I stooped simultaneously to pick it up so we didn't see the stranger leave but we heard a crash and we straightened up just in time to see the remnants of the window shade going through the window beside the counter. The stranger was nowhere in sight. We surmised that he was on the other end of the window shade.

"Wot 'n 'ell?" ejaculated the counterman in amazement.

"Wot 'n 'ell's right," chuckled Bill cheerfully. "Pay us the bet. We'll come back and help fix the shade later. We've got to give this paper to the guy outside so he can take it over to City Hall right away. It's official stuff."

He pointed to the information on its face: "Bench warrant for arrest of Frederick Jones, alias Scar Face Jones; charge, petty theft."

The counterman was impressed. "D'you know, I think that guy must have been Scar Face Jones," he declared solemnly. "In fact, I'd be willing to bet it was."

"I'm not a betting man," said Bill with dignity, but the jingling of six dollars dropping into his pocket rather belied his words.

THE END

Interesting Facts About London

THE coach in which the Lord Mayor of London rides on state occasions has been in use since the year 1757.

Returns of the Railway Clearing House show that 1,000 parcels a day are lost on the railways of the United Kingdom.

Nearly sixteen thousand police constables are required to protect London, and for this protection the citizens pay about 1,300,000 pounds sterling annually.

About half of all the foreigners in Great Britain reside in London. There are 22,000 in Scotland, 11,000 in Manchester, 9,000 in Liverpool, and 8,000 in Leeds.

The largest cab stand in the world is situated in London, at Waterloo Station, the terminus of the London and South Western Railway. It is a quarter of a mile in length. More than 1,000 cabs are called in the course of a day.

An enormous mass of water is used for suppressing fires in London. Last year it amounted to 30,000,000 gallons, or, expressed in weight, about 130,000 tons. Of this huge quantity about one-sixth was taken from rivers and canals, and the rest from the street mains.

London has 1,000 ships and 9,000 sailors in its port every day. It has upward of 75,000 persons living in its common lodging-houses, 25,000 persons annually arrested as drunk and disorderly, and one-third of the crime of the country is committed within its radius.

Kenneth P. Wood.

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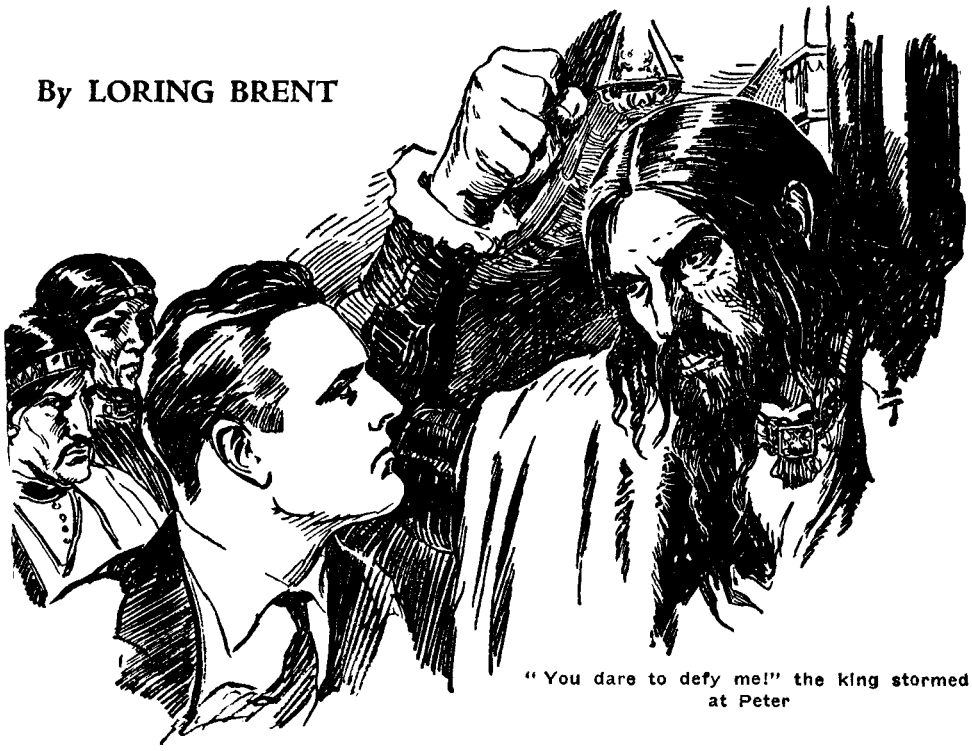
Kingdom of the Lost

By LORING BRENT



"You dare to defy me!" the king stormed at Peter

Banished into the leper colony of the Lost Kingdom, Peter the Brazen organizes a fearsome revolt

LEADING UP TO THIS CONCLUDING INSTALLMENT

PETER THE BRAZEN, one of the Orient's best known adventurers, had often heard of the Jaws of Hell, but he did not learn the true meaning of the phrase until he boarded the steamer Langpo at Hongkong and started for Singapore. The Langpo never reached Singapore. Instead, it headed for the Jaws of Hell, that fogbound, treacherous region of shoals in the South China Sea where ships had been disappearing for centuries, never to be heard of again.

Peter had gone aboard the Langpo to match his wits against the keen brain of The Octopus, the woman who called herself Lotus Burma, who had stolen $2,000,000 worth of diamonds from a friend of Peter's, and who had enslaved the mind of Peter's sweetheart, Susan O'Gilvie, by a subtle purple drug. He was discovered by Lotus Burma, and made captive, as was Jim Saunders, young American vice consul who was trailing The Octopus.

The Langpo, after raiding and scuttling a passenger ship, headed for a huge cliff in which was a large cave. The prisoners were taken through this entrance into a valley in which was a city of Oriental splendor. This lost world, ruled by a barbaric king, Hassan Barbarossa, was divided into two sections: one, reserved for the royal family; the other filled with a hundred thousand miserable, diseased slaves. Hassan Barbarossa held the mad dream of conquering the world.

He announced that Susan was to become his bride, and that Peter, Jim and Princess Ailena, his half sister, were to die. Peter knew that he would not be killed, however, until he revealed the hiding place of the

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diamonds, which he had taken from Lotus Burma and hidden.

As punishment, Peter was ordered banished to the colony of lepers.

CHAPTER XVII.

LIVING DEATH.

IN their friendliness, the lepers were horrible. Unclean, reeking, they packed about Peter. In the dim light, he saw faces vaguely—faces that sickened him and made him faint. Some faces without noses, some without mouths. These people pawed him—and this was meant to be the mauling of affection. He had the sensation of being packed in a soft mass of stinking. flesh. Bony hands patted his face and stroked his hair.

He could not have fought them off. And he now realized that he was being passed from hand to hand. They wanted to touch him, to feel him. A woman, naked except for bits of rags, threw bony arms about his neck and attempted to enfold his head and kiss him.

He wriggled free of her. He felt nauseated. The stench of bad flesh, of unclean flesh, made him want to vomit. He had visited pestilential sections of China, where famine stalked, where starving Chinese ate the roots of weeds and the bark from trees, where disease epidemics raged. He had been sickened and revolted by the things he had seen, but he had never been so revolted as by the things he now saw.

He believed he would go mad if he stayed in this place a full hour. Yet he must stay until that vague plan of his was forwarded a little. He must be returned alive and intact to the palace.

The next man who tried to paw him he pushed away. He shouted at them to keep back. And as if by magic, an area about him was cleared. Accustomed to instant, doglike obedience, these tragic wretches recognized in his voice the tones of command, and they automatically gave way.

Thereafter, for a time he was not molested. Only the small, inviolate circle in which he stood moved. It moved strangely, to allow others to see him. But it was slowly penetrating these dull brains that the visitor was not here in the capacity of master. He wielded no whip and was otherwise unarmed.

They would presently realize that he had been cast in here to share their own lot, to compete with them for the scant supply of food. Their temper, in fact, was already changing. And he wondered if, as time went on, they would tear his clothes to shreds—would rob him of everything he possessed, leaving him stripped naked and reduced to their own shocking level.

He looked back at the great wall. Beyond it he could dimly see the lights twinkling in the palace—a forbidden fairyland. He could see the tower with its torchlights, and the delicate and beautiful glass structure which Hassan the Fifteenth was erecting to celebrate his glory and that of his ancestors.

He was thirsty, and he wondered where their drinking pools were. For it was obvious to him that they would drink from pools like animals. As far as he could see, there was no structure, no kind of house or other habitation. He presumed they lived in caves or slept in the open.

Once, the moon for a few moments flooded the valley when a great pale beam found its way through a rift in the rolling low clouds. He was standing then on an elevation, a mound, perhaps a burial mound. And what he clearly saw by that random beam of

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pale light was worse than any of his imaginings.

UP the valley, as far as he could see, was a great stirring, as if, the news spreading that a visitor from the outworld had been admitted into these awful precincts, the gray human animals were stirring from uneasy slumber, were awakening and scrambling to inspect the newcomer for themselves. He caught the impression of a human pack so large that it seemed as if all of the humanity in the world was packed into this small space.

New waves of sickening odor reached him, and this odor was almost as revolting as that of a corrupt corpse. And the movement of pale faces and arms far away was distressingly like the movement of maggots about a corpse abandoned and neglected.

No man could retain his sanity long in such surroundings. Peter thought of the men and, worse even—the young girls—who had been thrust into this foul and disgraceful enclosure, to be seized and destroyed mentally, spiritually and physically by these hideous living dead.

It was, indeed, the Kingdom of the Lost.

He thought of the Barbarossas who had perpetrated this sin upon the name of mankind, and he hated them as he had never hated men in all his life. Here, indeed, were human guinea pigs —victims of an experiment by ruthless, selfish men. Here, to an extreme the world had never witnessed since its beginning, were the results of an incredible, prolonged depravity.

No slaves in the long, sorry story of humanity had been reduced to such woeful straits as these. This valley was nothing, indeed, but a great breeding pen in which the horrible experiment of soulless rulers was being carried on through the centuries. Here were human bodies robbed through centuries of their souls, reduced to a level lower than that suffered by any animal. The lowest forms of vermin were better off than this tragic band. A hundred thousand bodies without souls, a hundred thousand humans robbed of every human privilege but that of existence and the right to breed, so that, in due course, a red-bearded monarch might muster an army with which to overwhelm the civilized world!

It was all so monstrous, so horrible that a sane mind could not grasp a fraction of its portent. Beyond these high, glittering black walls were civilizations the lowest of which in comparison was a towering triumph in human accomplishment. Beyond these black precipices were complex law enforcement agencies which patrolled the land, the seas, the very air, to assure to humans the rights which are their due.

Not in the darkest ages of the world had mankind sunk to a level so low as that which existed here.

Peter reflected that the United States is the most powerful, most advanced nation in the world because of the fact that it is a melting pot, where the races of the world meet and unite, where the fire of the Latin blends with the calm strength of the Scandinavian, where the adventurous, the best traits of the Scotch, the Irish, the Italian, the French, and all the others have been fused into a single trait of high courage and high zeal. Fresh blood. New blood. Flowing together to form a race of fearless pioneers.

Contrasted with that he saw the hideous result of in-breeding—the vacant eyes, the dull hair, the slack,

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drooling mouths, the blank faces of a race deprived of the freshening, invigorating influences of new blood. A hundred thousand men and women produced, so to speak, in the identical mould!

In all the history of the world, there had never been an abuse of privilege so monstrous as this!

Was it a wonder that men and women, thrust into this awful place, promptly lost their reason?

Why had these soulless creatures lived? Why had not some epidemic mercifully killed them all?

THESE reflections and others flashed through Peter Moore's mind in the measured seconds in which the beam of moonlight struck through that rift in the rolling white clouds and showed him graphically the extent of the Barbarossas' infamous influence over this mass of humanity under the iron heel of their power.

At that moment he could have killed Hassan Barbarossa with bare hands.

And at that moment the first stone was thrown. The idiot mob had sensed that he was not sent here as a master.

Then there was an interval of waiting. If he was a master, he would display in no uncertain terms his resentment at the thrown stone.

The stone flashed past under his chin, ticked the cloth on his shoulder. And it signalled Peter Moore into trying the plan on which all his hopes depended—a thread slender enough. The product of his inventive genius—the tiny radio receiver—was in the inside pocket of his coat—where it had been since he had played it for the amusement of Princess Ailena.

He did not remove it from his coat, but reached inside and quickly touched the dials. He was not, he realized, dealing with a collective human intelligence, but with an uncertain mob emotion.

Through his coat, a voice said the words, "Beethoven's 'Moonlight Sonata' will be the next offering of the Royal Symphonic Orchestra of Sydney, Australia." The announcer's voice blended into the first notes of that famous composition.

Peter adjusted the volume control to its loudest pitch. The music of a two hundred piece orchestra came swelling from the magical little instrument, and he prayed that the tubes of his own invention would not burn out, that the battery on which he had labored so many months would not suddenly go dead.

As the great tide of music swelled from the tiny instrument, as if poured from his heart, he raised his hands over his head. He had planned this moment carefully, and he executed the plan with dramatic purpose.

All about him, gray, idiot faces stared as if, indeed, they stared upon some miracle granted them by an unknown Heaven. Mouths gaped and drooled. Jaws dropped. Then there was a great whispering sound, as of countless thousands of throats uttering breaths of awe.

And suddenly, as far as the eye could reach in the dim light, the leprous idiots began throwing themselves on their faces—prostrating themselves before this deity, this tall blond god from whose heart poured in deep volumes the music of a moonstruck German composer.

No miracle, however clever, however amazing, could have struck awe in such measure into the hearts of any pagan people. The little metal box with its intricate arrangement of tubes and condensers and batteries and clever

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circuits—this pocket-size miracle had elevated a man on their own footing, a slave, to godhood. Peter Moore was suddenly a king in his own right—greater, more wonderful, more terrible in their eyes than the king they had been taught to worship. Yet it was a power of which he could use but a very little.

With it, he hoped to accomplish two small things—to plant an idea in the mind of one man, and to be delivered from this moonlit inferno.

HE moved down from the mound on which he had permitted the miracle to occur. He shut off the "Moonlight Sonata" only because he feared the tiny, delicate battery might be drained. And he had further uses for this ingenious little invention of his.

But that demonstration had been sufficient. Way was made for him as he advanced toward the great wall. He wanted to examine it, to ascertain if there was some way in which it might be scaled. But he had no intention of turning loose this idiot mob on the palace. To do so would frustrate his other plan. And with this mob on the other side of the wall, Susan, Ailena and Jim Saunders would not be safe. No one would be safe if the destructive power of this wretched million were ever turned loose.

His plan was of much smaller scope; much more subtle.

He walked the length of the wall, followed at a respectful distance by his worshipers. As he advanced, those in his path made way and prostrated themselves.

From precipice to precipice, the wall was about a mile in length. He counted forty sentries patrolling it. He found no stairs of any kind, and there was but the one gate—the one through which he had entered.

Having reached the far end, he started back. He stopped just below the fantastic structure of precious colored glass which the present Hassan Barbarossa was having erected to the glory of himself and his ancestors.

Peter stared up at this intricate, beautiful, fairylike structure for a long time. Then he stooped down and picked up a rock. With all his strength, he hurled it. There was a sound of glass falling in splinters.

A GREAT gasp went up from the human mass about him. He picked up another rock and threw it. There was another smashing sound.

Sentries were coming along the great wall on the run. His next rock he threw at a sentry.

Another gasp went up. So far, his rock-throwing had not been imitated. To have thrown a rock at the million-dollar glass monument or at the guards would have been in violation not of years but of centuries of abject worship and obedience to the red-bearded kings who lived on the other side of the wall—a worship and obedience which had been beaten into them for upwards of four centuries.

He had to overcome that powerful prejudice. He did so by shouting at them to do as he was doing. He threw more rocks. One struck a sentry in the hand as he was about to fire his rifle. Peter presumed that the sentries had been instructed to fire on him under no conditions. Once again, so he believed, his life was safe because of those de Sylva diamonds.

But the sentries began firing into the mob. And this firing and Peter's rock-throwing eventually caused the re-

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sponse he wanted. A man near him picked up a rock and, with a scream, threw it at the glass monument. Others followed this revolutionary example.

Instantly, it seemed, the air was full of rocks. Peter now stood back and watched. Thousands of eager hands were scooping up large and small stones and hurling them. The sentries ran about, firing at random into the mob, inflicting death and injuries, but never stopping that meteoric shower. Sentries fell. Others replaced them. These, too, were struck down.

And the glass monument to the glory of the Barbarossas was vanishing as a monument of snow vanishes in a downpour of rain. Rocks hailed upon it by the countless thousands, smashing the glass, bending and twisting the delicate metal frames on which the glass was being mounted. The million-dollar glory became, within a space of minutes, a twisted, mangled mass of metal and shattered glass.

When this vandalism was complete, Peter made his way toward the other end of the wall—the gate. Men on the other side of the thick bars were shouting his name. Servants of the palace were running about in the compound, dodging rocks.

Peter reached the gate. Through the thick bars he saw Jengha peering at him, his long gray face transfused with terror and wonder.

"You are pardoned!" shouted the keeper of the keys. "You are to be freed at once!"

"Not yet! Tell your master that if he does not guarantee the freedom of my friends—our instant delivery to the outworld—I will have this mob swarm these walls and destroy him and his palace!"

"He has told me to grant you any desire!"

"Then open the gate!"

Peter was not deceived. He knew that Hassan would grant any desire under heaven to have him delivered into the palace again—and then reverse his promise. Peter did not look behind him when the gate opened. He had seen, he hoped, the last of the valley of the leprous idiots. As long as he lived, he would wear on his very soul the scars of that monstrous place.

The gate clanged behind him. And as if that had been a signal, the rocks stopped falling. A moan went up, soft at first, then louder and louder until it echoed from precipice to precipice and filled the night—a moaning sigh of lost hope, of frustration, from the throats, the very hearts, of that great legion of the cursed.

CHAPTER XVIII.

PETER'S PLAN.

THE adventurer was swiftly spirited into the palace, and into the presence of his imperial majesty, King Hassan the Fifteenth. The red-bearded monarch had a wild look. He was pacing up and down in that room of the purple hangings, pale and gaunt of face, eyes tigerish yellow and insane with fury.

When he saw Peter, he whirled about and licked his pale lips. He was shaking with kingly rage—and with helpless human fury. Yet there was in his face a puzzlement and awe. "You—" he began, in a thin, cracking voice. "What did you do to my people? How did you arouse them in so short a time?"

"I have a dark magic, your majesty." Peter sent a glance at Jengha. The keeper of the keys was

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staring at him, his eyes still slight with that wonder and terror. And Peter was, for the moment, satisfied. He said nothing of Hassan's promise, and in the red-bearded king's next breath, his guess at the emptiness of that promise was verified.

"You dare to defy me! You dare to turn my people against me and against my works! You have the insolence—" He choked on his words. He beat his hands together. "You caused death and injury to more than a hundred of my guards! I will have you killed! I will have you drawn and quartered! I will have every inch of your insolent flesh tortured until—"

"But will that find your diamonds?" Peter quietly interrupted.

"I will think of a better way than hanging you by your thumbs! Go! Tomorrow—you die!"

Peter withdrew. His only fear was that, at this juncture, Hassan would order some form of torture to which Peter's knowledge of Yogism would not apply. Red-hot charcoal would have done it—perhaps. Threat of cobra poison would have done it, for Peter Moore had his weakness. Poisonous reptiles. He loathed and dreaded them.

As he left the purple room and the wrathful monarch, he realized that he had succeeded in bluffing Hassan the Fifteenth. The red-bearded king could not understand a man whose will he could not break. No doubt, in hundreds of years, that banishment among the dreadful humans who thronged the valley beyond the wall had, in a brief time, successfully wrung confessions and precious secrets from every victim of the Barbarossas. But Peter Moore had turned the mob spirit of that detestable human mass to his own advantage. By his destruction of the glass monument he had aroused the kingly ire. Yet he had come off first in the clash with Hassan's will and that monarch, hating him, was strangely in awe of his magical powers.

It had been a delicate and dangerous moment, but it was past. If he was to die tomorrow, he must work fast.

Peter made his way quickly to the bronze room. On his way he directed a servant to bring water for bathing. His skin was creeping from contact with the filthy flesh of the valley people. He felt soiled and polluted.

In the bronze room he found another man at his pacing. Jim Saunders, vice consul to Foochow, was striding up and down the room, wild of eye and pale of face, but these were not the symptoms of rage.

When he saw Peter, he stopped pacing, and stared. "Good God," he said. "Didn't they put you on the other side of that wall?"

"They did."

"How in hell did you get out?"

Peter swiftly summed it up, and Jim Saunders stared at him with that same puzzled awe of King Hassan.

FOUR servants entered. One carried wash cloths and brushes, another fresh clothes. Two staggered under the weight of a great bronze urn filled with water. They withdrew and Peter fell to scrubbing himself from head to foot. He asked Saunders if he had talked to Jengha, the keeper of the keys.

"I did! I've talked to him ever since you left. Ailena brought him up here. We both talked to him. And you can bank on only one thing—he won't betray our confidence. Not because of us, but because of Ailena. He worships that girl. She told him she loved me. He said he would like to

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help her escape—but he loves his life, too. It's a funny thing, the way people love their lives. So few lives are worth it!" He paused and narrowed his eyes. "What did Hassan say?"

"Among other things, that I'm going to die tomorrow. But I suspect it's only another threat. He's afraid to torture me, thinking I may die and never disclose the hiding place of those diamonds. He isn't being very clever. He should know that if he threatened to torture Susan, I'd come clean quickly enough. He's too furious to think, though. What else happened?"

"Nothing ever happens. Ah, yes. Here's a bit of news—a mere detail. But it may interest you. It proves that he's at least been thinking about something. Tomorrow is the red letter day in the Barbarossa calendar—The Day of the Greatest Whirling Ecstasy. As Ailena told us, Hassan is going to marry your girl and he's going to put on a big celebration. A lot of people he doesn't like are going to spin off into space, including Ailena. But I'm going to be a special treat."

Peter, getting into fresh clothes, cried, "What?"

"Have you ever heard of white leopards?"

"Albinos?"

"Perhaps. They have pink eyes—like white rabbits. These are half-starved white leopards, and they're kept downstairs in this palace. Tomorrow evening, to celebrate his wedding to Susan, I am going to be thrown to the pink-eyed leopards! That's the final dope. And now, unless I'm crazy, you'll join me! He'll throw us both to the leopards and in the meantime he probably expects you'll break down and tell where the diamonds are."

Peter was putting on his coat as a knock sounded at the door. The vice consul to Foochow opened it. Princess Ailena and Susan came in, both pale, both wearing looks of determination. Susan flew into Peter's arms, demanded to know if he'd been hurt. But even in her solicitude he realized that she had more hope, more confidence, than at any time since their arrival in this incredible valley.

"I knew you'd escape from that horrible place," she told him, kissing him. "It's the first time it's ever been done. Thousands of people have been turned in with those awful people—and you're the only one who's come out! Oh, darling, you're wonderful! If you can get out of there, you can get all of us out of here. Have you a plan?"

"I have. I want Jengha."

Princess Ailena returned to the door. "I'll bring him."

"One moment, Ailena. Whatever I say—if he looks to you—back me up."

"Yes."

JENGHA could not have been far away, for she returned with him very shortly. The tall, gray-eyed man came into the room with apparent reluctance. He advanced uncertainly, with his eyes on Peter's face as if fascinated.

He muttered, "No, no," in a frightened voice. "I know why you have sent for me. Your friend talked to me. It is impossible for you to escape. I cannot give you the key. If I did, you would be killed. And none of you would escape."

Peter looked at him grimly. "That is not my plan, Jengha. I wanted to talk to you. I wanted to know, first of all, if you wish to leave this valley."

The tall, gray-eyed man's mouth became stubborn. "Who has not dreamed of escaping from this valley?

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But it is not for me. I have a sacred trust. I am the keeper of the tower. Before me, my father held that trust, and his father before him. That trust has never been violated by one of my name. It will not be now."

"But have you no feeling of obligation toward Princess Ailena?"

"I have a greater feeling of obligation toward my master."

"Only because you are in terror of him."

"There is no plan you can suggest," Jengha answered, "that would succeed. We would all be killed. And I and my family would be disgraced."

"But, suppose it could be arranged—"

"There is no possible plan that could succeed," Jengha reiterated with firmness.

"Two hours ago you would have said there was no plan by which any man could escape from beyond that wall. That gate has opened to admit many men and women into the valley—and none has ever returned. You saw me return."

"I was amazed. How did you do it?"

Peter smiled. "That is my secret. If I had wished, I could have sent that mob swarming over the wall to destroy and kill."

"How did you do it?" Jengha repeated in a desperate voice.

"I could give you that secret. It would give you immediate power over that great mob. You would instantly become a general with an army of a hundred thousand at your back. You could send them over this wall. You could become king in Hassan's place! You could visit the outworld at your pleasure."

Jengha was staring at him, licking his gray lips.

"No, no, it's impossible! I would be killed!"

"You could not be killed! If you will listen to my plan—"

"No."

"But look here, pal," Jim Saunders interrupted, "you saw what he did. He used his magic out there. In less than ten seconds, he was the head man. It took him that time to turn a hundred thousand fighting fools against the Barbarossas. In ten seconds, he undid the work of centuries. You, too, can be that man!"

Jengha looked at the vice consul dubiously, then back at Peter.

"What was this trick?"

"It is a trick by which a man's heart makes wonderful music."

"A trick?"

"Your trick, if you will help us."

"A miracle!" Saunders cried.

Jengha panted: "Let me hear! Let me hear!"

Peter reached into his coat and touched the dials. There was an interval of silence. Then from the throat of that amazingly useful little invention of his surged a Spanish waltz. From a short-wave station in Madrid, across Europe, across Asia Minor and India and Cambodia, the waltz came through the vibrant ether. It was rich and golden melody.

PETER had backed away from Jengha. With a mystic expression on his face, with his hand under his heart—just under the concealed pocket radio—he watched Jengha.

The keeper of the keys had likewise backed away. He was licking his lips, staring with hypnotized eyes at the approximate region of Peter's thumping heart.

His pale lips worked, but no sounds came from them. He darted glances

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at Susan, at Ailena and at Jim Saunders. Peter reached into his coat and shut off the music.

And Jengha gasped, "How is it done? Truly, it is a miracle!"

"It is a miracle of modern science and invention," Peter answered. He took the small black case from his pocket. Jengha stared at it fearfully. "Here, Jengha. Hold it in your hand!"

"No, no!"

"It won't hurt you. Ailena, show him."

The red-haired girl accepted the tiny instrument. She turned the knobs. And when the golden music surged from it, she laughed. Jengha seemed somewhat relieved, but he was still utterly amazed and awestruck.

Finally, he cried with eagerness, "Let me try!" He took the receiver and turned the control switch. And at the command of his fingers, the Spanish waltz leaped out again.

Jim Saunders tried to explain the mystery. "It is coming from Madrid, Spain. A powerful electrical station is sending waves through the air, and these waves carry the music of a large dance orchestra over thousands of miles of space to that little box. The little box changes back the electrical waves into sound."

But Jengha, of course, could not understand. He was as delighted as a child with its first toy train. Peter tuned in other stations and said, "It is safe to say that this will work at any hour of the day or night, because somewhere in the world, a station will be broadcasting either music or voices. And this little kit will pick up every station in existence."

Greedily, Jengha answered, "I would like to have that little box of magic."

Then his eagerness departed; there were too many objections. Just what, he wanted to know, was Peter's plan?

"Briefly, this: just before this lady"—he indicated Susan—"leaves tomorrow in the green gown, for the wedding ceremony, you will call at her room, and she will give you this magical box. She will then wait for you to go up and into the tower. That will arouse no suspicion, will it—your going into the tower?"

"No. But—"

"She will cross the square and get into the chariot. When Hassan drives it around the square, he will stop before the tower. Unless I am greatly mistaken, no one will be watching the tunnel. If I am wrong, correct me."

"So far, you are not wrong. But—"

"Very well. Here is the plan. You will throw the lever which opens the tunnel gates. You will then come down the tower. If what you have done is discovered, if any attempt is made at stopping you, you have only to turn on this magic box. But you will not be noticed, I assure you, Jengha. Because, while you are descending the tower, there will be great excitement."

"Of what nature, master?"

"This gentleman and I will have leaped into the chariot and overwhelmed Hassan. Princess Ailena will be with us. We will drive like mad down the square and into the tunnel. Before the gates can be dropped, we will have escaped."

"It is incredible!" Jengha gasped.

"But why won't it work?"

"It may work. It is astounding. But it may work. Yet what becomes of me?"

"You will have a job ahead of you. You will run to the compound and let yourself into the valley. You will let those million people hear the music from your heart. You will lead them

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in an attack. You will throw stones until a ramp has been made by which the wall can be climbed. With your million at your back, you will attack and destroy every living Barbarossa—and become the king yourself!"

"Ah, that is a mad plan, master!" But Jengha's eyes were no longer dull, and his face was not gray. It seemed to glow. Then his face grew long and his eyes went dull. He had thought of objections. He had, he said, a thousand objections.

Patiently, Peter answered them, met them, overcame them, one by one. And with each crop dispensed with, the keeper of the keys presented a fresh crop. Jengha's greatest doubt concerned his control over his idiot subjects once he had them on the other side of the wall. How was he to drive them back? How was he to establish his kingly authority? Peter answered that—the hardest question of them all. It was a long and elaborate answer, chiefly involving firearms, which must not fall into the mob's hands.

Once, Peter glanced at the window. It was an arch of gray light now. Dawn was here. A little later he saw the lighted valley.

AND, at length, Jengha's last doubts were overridden. He would do it!

"I see no reason why we cannot carry through this plan as you have drawn it, master," he said. "I will be the king of this valley, and you, your sweetheart, and this other gentleman and Princess Ailena will escape to the outworld! But I must exact from you a promise. You will never breathe a word of this place to a living soul."

"You have that promise," Peter firmly answered.

"Very well, master. Then, just before the ceremony, I will call at the silver room—and this lady will give me the magic box."

"May I see that key?"

Jengha showed it to him—an intricately fashioned key of rare kingfisher jade, which he carried on a fine gold chain about his neck.

Then Jengha left the room with the swagger of a man already king. Susan was delighted with the resourcefulness of the plan. For the first time, she was the happy girl Peter had once known. She declared that the plan was perfectly wonderful. Even the lovely red-haired princess, always so dubious of any plan of escape, was enthusiastic. Yet she sounded a notice of caution.

"Susan and I will go now. We will stay in the silver room until it is time. And I advise you two men to stay here. There is only one possible complication—Hassan may decide to imprison you, or torture you, because of the diamonds, sometime before the ceremony. I will have food sent here."

Susan started for the door, then whirled about and ran to Peter. Her eyes were sparkling with excitement. And her lovely face was flushed. She impulsively threw her arms about his neck and kissed him.

"Darling," she said, "you're simply wonderful. Just think of it, Peter! By tonight, we'll be out of this place! In a few days, we'll be in Hongkong. Civilization! We'll be married! Oh, I love you so much, Peter!"

He did not say that he loved her, too—he did not have the chance. With her beautiful sparkling eyes close to his face, she whispered, "But we won't go back to America, darling. We'll stay in China. America would be so dull?"

"Dull?" Peter echoed.

"Oh, life is so exciting in China!

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We've had such fun. We'll have greater fun!"

"More adventure!"

"Yes, darling!"

Peter's ardor cooled perceptibly. She wasn't joking. The little thrill-hunter meant it. In previous adventures, she had waited until they were clear of a dangerous predicament before wanting fresh excitement. With their freedom still to be fought for, with the odds tremendously against them, she already craved fresh, new adventure!

Loving Susan as he did, Peter was suddenly discouraged. She was incurable. She would never be cured of her capacity of plunging herself and others into trouble.

He kissed her gently and led her to the door. Peter asked Ailena if she could secure revolvers or automatic pistols for him and Jim Saunders. She said she could not do so without arousing dangerous suspicion. Susan offered him her .25 caliber Colt's automatic, but he told her to keep it.

WHEN the girls were gone, the two young men began a discussion of the details of Peter's plan. Unarmed, they must somehow secure a boat in which to escape from the black cave.

Food was brought to them. A message came, by a servant, from Princess Ailena, in which she said that Hassan was spending his morning trying to ascertain what kind of magic it was that Peter had used last night in the valley; that he was puzzled and troubled and irritable. The accounts he had received had varied. Some declared that a nimbus of holy light had shone about Peter's head. Others described his whole person bathed in a sacred glow. Many reports had it that he lifted his hands and that music flowed from the tips of his fingers. Others believed that he had drawn the divine music down to earth from the clouds.

As long as Hassan the Fifteenth was puzzled, worried, Peter was safe. Hassan would know that no torture could wring from Peter the secret of his magic. It was likely that the American adventurer would be safe until late afternoon at least. But Hassan had not changed his mind about putting the two Americans to death. They would be tossed into a bamboo enclosure especially erected for the occasion on the stone wall, and into this enclosure, one at a time, the white leopards would be loosed.

As the time for the ceremony approached, Peter became more and more nervous, as a fighter does, as the zero hour of his appearance in the prize ring comes nearer and nearer. He was not afraid. He knew that he had taken the only course open to him. His worry was the great number of possible ways in which his plan could go astray. It depended on so many unpredictable factors. Yet it had to be daring. It had to be spectacular and dramatic. On those very features its success depended.

Jim Saunders said, "You have done everything a man could. You have anticipated everything possible. The rest is in the lap of the gods. No one anticipates trouble, least of all that red-bearded rat. It is going to be a surprise party—and by the time the surprise wears off, we'll be long gone. And once out of this hellish place, we'll take our chances with the fog, the waves and the wind. You've hatched a wonderful scheme. You're a great guy, Pete. You're the greatest guy I ever knew."

They were interrupted by a knock at the door. It was a servant, to tell

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them that they were expected with the rest of the royal household in the square immediately.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE SACRIFICE.

THE collapse of Peter's complex plan of escape from the Kingdom of the Lost was occasioned, as might have been expected, by Jengha. The keeper of the keys had been overwhelmed by the magic of the pocket radio. He had been captivated by Peter's plan for him to become the new king of the Valley of the Barbarossas. But as the hours dragged on, Jengha grew dubious. He was, after all, the product of centuries of breeding along a single narrow line of slavelike obedience. In generation after generation of Jenghas had been reposed the sacred trust of the blue tower—the control of the bronze tunnel gates. His dreams of power had been short-lived. Peter's arguments, though they had been true, logical and correct down to the finest detail, did not weigh as heavily in Jengha's brain as did his sense of slavelike duty to his ruler.

He did not return to Peter to argue it out. He did not have the courage. He did not wish to argue it out. He was afraid of the American and his black magic. Instead, Jengha waited until the time came for him to appear at the silver room, to secure the magical little black box from Susan. And by this time, it was too late for Peter to be of help.

Susan was alone in the silver room. Some minutes before, Princess Ailena had left to join Peter and Jim Saunders in the long line of people stretching from the palace to the other side of the square.

Waiting for the servant who would summon her, she went to the window and looked down. She could see Peter and Jim and Ailena, standing in a little group in the very center of the long line—standing not a hundred feet away from the base of the blue tower.

On the great wall, not far from the tower, was the bamboo enclosure which had been built as a sacrificial pen—for Peter and Jim. Susan gave it a glance of disdain.

She was thrilled as she had never before been thrilled in her life. The drama of the moment, and the promised drama of the ensuing half hour, set her heart to beating hard. Her eyes, in the mirror, had never been so beautiful, so large, so lustrous. She was glad she was so beautiful, for Peter's sake. She was glad that she would make him such a beautiful bride.

She said, into the great, deep mirror, "I'll make him a lovely bride." For Susan was fully aware how beautiful she was. She was proud of her loveliness, of her slim, exquisite body, of her small, beautiful hands and feet. She was an aristocrat—one of the last of a race that will soon be extinct.

But Susan was as selfish as she was lovely. She loved Peter Moore as she had never believed she could ever love a man. She adored him. But she had no intention, after their marriage, of letting Peter spoil her life. There would be no children. There would be no settling down, no comfortable security—and respectability.

Why should they settle down? With the whole world at their disposal—a world teeming with exciting and dangerous adventure for the asking. And her wealth—her wonderful millions—a magic carpet on which they would fly here and there and into the most fascinating and dangerous thrills.

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More than anything in her life, she looked forward to this afternoon's wonderful excitement. All eyes would be upon her beauty. And at the end—the thrilling break for freedom! They would not fail. She trusted Peter. And Peter Moore never had failed her.

Looking down at him now from her window, his well-shaped head, his wide shoulders, his slender, erect carriage, she loved him more than ever before.

THERE was a hurried rapping of knuckles at the silver door. She took a deep breath. It would be, of course, the servant, for at that moment, far across the square, she saw the flash and glitter of the golden chariot, the snowy whiteness of its spirited horses. Seeing the purple figure in the chariot, she laughed. She threw open the door.

But it was not the servant. It was Jengha.

Susan laughed excitedly. She cried, "Ah! Just a moment!" And ran back into the room. She had almost forgotten that Jengha had failed to come for the little black box. Suppose she had left the room, forgetting, in her excitement, that important detail! It would have been like her, she reflected. "I am such a little rattle-brain."

But Jengha did not extend his hand to accept the little magical black box. Instead, with hands clutched nervously behind him, he shook his head.

"Madam, I cannot betray my king. I cannot go through with this."

Susan uttered a gasp. Her heart suddenly went cold, then it began to race with panic. Hysterically, she cried, "Jengha! You can't mean it! You can't back out now! You promised!"

"I am sorry, madam. But I have given it much thought. I cannot go through with it. The risk is too great. I was carred away by your lover's enthusiasm. But I am not the man for it. I would fail."

Thoughts confused, bewildered, desperate, came tumbling through the girl's brain. She was frantic. She was trapped. She did not know what to say or do. She begged him to reconsider. She begged him to have pity on her, on Princess Ailena, on the two men. But Jengha would not be argued with. The more she entreated, the more she argued and bullied, the more firm he became in his decision. No, he would not change his mind. He was sorry. It was his life against theirs. It was their wish against the honor and the glory of his family.

"Freedom for you and your friends, madam, means disgrace, dishonor, death for me."

Suddenly, into the agonized churning of her mind, penetrated an icy thought—a horrible thought. It was as if some one else were doing the thinking for her. Certainly, she herself could not have created such a chain of hideous, monstrous thinking. She had an instant in which to make her decision.

Jengha was turning to go. She made her decision. In a frightened little voice, she cried, "Jengha!"

He returned. "But it is useless!"

"Come into this room!"

Now he obeyed. She shut the door. She faced him. From the bosom of her pale-green robe she removed her little automatic pistol. She levelled it at him and whispered, "Give me that key!"

Frightened, he started back to the door. "No, madam! Oh, no!"

When his hand was on the knob, she aimed as steadily as she could at his

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head. Because of her shaking hand, the shot went wild. It tore a gash along his scalp. The next shot was better. It struck into his skull above the ear. As he tottered, she fired four more shots. Three of the silvery little bullets drove into his brain. The fourth struck the silver door, and, ricocheting, went screaming up to strike flakes of silver from the ceiling.

Susan returned the pistol to her bosom. The hot barrel burned her tender flesh, but she did not care. What mattered now what happened to her tender flesh?

She took the key from around his neck, placed the fine gold chain around her own, and dropped the key down between her breasts. Then she dragged the dead man away from the door, went out into the corridor, closed the door after her, and waited.

She was not afraid now. Her eyes were shining as they had never shone before. Her face was transfigured. It glowed as if with an inner light. For perhaps the first time in her life, Susan —spoiled, selfish, willful, greedy Susan —was proud of something beside her exquisite beauty.

PETER and the red-haired princess and the vice consul to Foochow watched Susan approach. Her chin was lifted. Her eyes were large and glowing. In the two years since Peter had first met her on the trans-pacific crossing, he had never seen her so lovely. Or so unafraid. There was courage in the way she carried her small, exquisite head, in the very way she set down her small dainty feet.

Watching her as she came, Peter was proud of Susan. She was playing her part, he reflected, with rare courage.

There was no sunlight. A little more than a thousand feet up the walls of the black precipices—just above the golden top of the blue tower—the fog lay like a blanket of uneasy ivory.

The light that came through was, however, brilliant and hard. In utter silence, Susan walked the length of the line. Her pale green robe floated about her, matching her slimness and grace. The emeralds with which the bodice was encrusted flashed and shimmered in lovely waves of sheerest green.

She was about to pass Peter. So far, she had turned her head neither to right nor left. But just as she was opposite him, she turned and smiled. It was a smile of such sweetness as he had never before seen at her lips, even at her tenderest moments when she was telling him how she loved him. He gave her back a smile for courage. He saw there was moisture in her large, amethystine eyes, and he presumed that this was only a revelation of the inner nervousness that she was otherwise concealing so nobly.

She passed on, and that smile lingered in his memory. It puzzled him. It troubled him.

He watched her approach the golden chariot. Hassan the Fifteenth was waiting, holding the eight white reins in his powerful red hands. He was watching her greedily, with a smile at his thick red lips.

Hassan did not help her into the chariot. According to the old ritual, the bride was supposed to come to the bridegroom, as if willingly, as if eager for him. That was the tradition. So Susan stepped into the golden car. Hassan cracked a long white whip, and the four magnificent white horses started off with a clatter.

It was like a pageant of the old and all but forgotten days of early empire. So might the victorious Cæsar have driven through the streets of Rome, or

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Hannibal through the warlike Carthage, or—an early Barbarossa, returning triumphant from piratical looting, through the cheering streets of Constantinople.

The golden chariot, gleaming in the diffused light from the clouds, went whirling to the end of the square. It passed the bronze door at the tunnel entrance. It swerved and came back, with a clattering thunder of hoofs, a ringing of thick iron tires, the purple robe and the green robe of its occupants floating out behind in a strange and remarkable banner.

By now, Peter knew that something was amiss. Jengha had not appeared. Long ago, Jengha should have slipped out of the palace and climbed the spiral stairs to the control room. For now was the time when the excitement should begin.

He whispered to Ailena, "Where is Jengha?"

And she replied, "Oh, something must have happened! We are lost! In only a moment, Hassan will command me to climb the tower. Then he will order the other sacrificial victims to be fetched. Then you and Jim will be taken to that cage—"

It was as if an iron band had suddenly been placed about Peter's heart. He felt an actual stab of pain. His throat was dust-dry. His knees felt weak. His plan, after all, had failed! Sickness, desperation went through him in waves.

Jim, beside him, panted, "We'll die fighting, kid! Believe me, it will cost them something. We'll go for that rat, anyway!"

THE chariot had come to a stop just in front of them. Hassan had turned to face them. His eyes dwelled malevolently on his half-sister's white, beautiful face. His eyes rested possessively on Susan's shoulders.

And suddenly Susan twisted away from those great red paws. Both hands plunged into the bosom of her dress. She screamed: "Peter! Get him! Go! I've got the key!"

As if he were paralyzed, Peter watched. In a nightmare, he saw Susan point the little automatic at Hassan's head—saw the little spurt of flame. As Hassan staggered back, she leaped down from the chariot and ran toward the tower. In his sick confusion, Peter saw that she held high over her head Jengha's kingfisher jade key—the key to the control room of the tower!

It was not Peter but Jim Saunders who perceived, with the flashing speed of intuition, what Susan's plans were; realized that it was their only hope of getting out of this place alive—realized that Susan was offering her life as a supreme sacrifice so that the three of them could escape. Realized, too, that there could be no other way. And that Peter Moore would very likely spoil their plans when the truth struck him.

Therefore, the vice consul's first act was a surprise attack on Peter Moore. As Susan ran up the spiral stairway, he struck Peter a smashing blow with his fist in the side of the head. Peter collapsed in his arms.

Saunders seized his shoulders and dragged him toward the chariot in which Hassan the Fifteenth, not dead but dazed, was slumped. There was no time to get rid of the red-bearded king.

Ailena had followed him. She, too, had realized that Susan was giving to them their life and liberty by sacrificing her own.

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SAUNDERS dragged Peter into the golden car, told Ailena to hold tight to him, and picked up reins and whip. He cracked the whip.

And before the guards could come running, before the servants in the palace could reach the turret room, before any of the crowd in the square could act—Susan had reached the control tower.

By now, the golden chariot, with its strange crew—a half-fainting girl, two half-conscious men, with Jim Saunders at the reins, was rattling and clattering down the square toward the tunnel, the four white horses plunging at a full run.

The bronze gate was still closed. Jim Saunders sent a desperate glance behind him. He could not see Susan. But when he looked ahead, the bronze door was slowly lifting! She was in the control room—pulling that great lever!

The vice consul sent another glance arear. Members of the royal household were streaming after the chariot. Men and women were shouting, yelling, beckoning. Guards were frantically running to and fro along the great wall.

Suddenly, Susan reappeared—a tiny green figure. She was finishing her job. She was climbing to the golden roof!

Peter was recovering from that smashing blow on the head. And Hassan XV was recovering from the smashing shock of the glancing bullet. With growls and oaths, he was struggling up from the floor of the swaying golden car.

Peter shook his head, as a fighter, floored, does, in trying to clear the black mists from his brain. He shook his head and stared. He, too, saw that small figure climb to the golden floor.

He shook his head again. He shouted, "Stop! Stop!" But Jim Saunders did not stop. And Peter, with an awful groan, burst out: "She's going to kill herself!"

He saw the wind catch the folds of pale-green cloth—saw, or imagined he saw—the glitter of the emerald-encrusted bodice. Susan raised her hands slowly over her head. She slowly stretched her arms—in a gesture of farewell. Now she was pivotting on the golden floor. It was fantastic. Impossible! It could not be Susan. His Susan!

She spun about slowly twice. She seemed to crumple, as if the high courage that had sustained her thus far had suddenly run out of her. In her was not the strength to whirl into that state of rapture. She slipped off the edge. She began slowly to fall, tumbling over and over through the air.

Peter stared—and clenched his eyes. He could not watch that tiny, beloved figure be impaled on those horrible barbed spears.

A sigh reached him. It was a sigh of utter desolation—as if the world had given off a sigh of deep regret. Susan was dead! Susan had leaped from that tower and killed herself, so that he and Saunders and Ailena might gain their freedom!

It was incredible that she had done this thing—that Susan, living, breathing, warm Susan—his Susan—had leaped to her death. For death is the hardest of all facts for a lover to grasp. He loved her so much, he could not believe that she was dead. Other people died, but not the person you loved. It couldn't be true! He had saved her from so many dangers—had planned so carefully, with such thoroughness, to save her from this horrible place. He could not believe she was really

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dead. But she was. She had sacrificed her life to spare his.

CHAPTER XX.

ESCAPE.

AT about this time, Hassan Barbarossa came strenuously to life. He made a snatch for the white reins. He gave them a violent jerk. He roared: "Stop this chariot! Stop it, I say!"

He gave the reins another, stronger jerk. The white horses swerved. Saunders struck the royal hand with the butt of the whip. He jerked the horses back on the original line of their madly galloping flight.

But would the horses enter the tunnel? Horses fear the unknown. They might, at the last moment, swerve in panic to right or left—might refuse to enter the tunnel. Such a hesitation would be disastrous. Doubtless, the chariot would upset. Its occupants would be scattered, perhaps knocked senseless. And the pursuit would be upon them.

But the horses did not swerve. Never hesitating, they plunged into the tunnel's mouth. The great bronze door flashed past overhead. Beyond, dimly, stretched the tunnel, with its other bronze doors, all lifted by the ingenious mechanism which Susan had set going a moment before she plunged to her death.

Peter was struggling with the red-bearded king. They were locked in each other's arms, striking, kicking.

It seemed to Jim Saunders that the bronze doors were starting to close. Doubtless, some one had hastened up the stairs to undo, if possible, what Susan had done — would attempt to trap the fugitives.

Between the fifth and sixth doors, Saunders saw the bronze slab Ailena had mentioned. He saw the ring in the wall—black with the corrosion of age and salt moisture. He would have liked to snatch the ring as he passed, but he was too busy with the charging horses. He realized now that they were running away—that they were utterly beyond human control.

The last of the gates flashed by overhead. It was beginning to close. All twelve, simultaneously, were closing!

PETER MOORE disengaged himself from the powerful arms of Hassan and leaped out of the chariot. He fell and rolled over and over. He scrambled up and ran back down the tunnel.

Trying to fight the terrified horses, Saunders yelled, "Come back! Those gates are closing! You'll be trapped!"

King Hassan jumped out of the lurching golden car. He, too, sprawled, rolled over and over, and scrambled to his feet. He went plunging down the tunnel after Peter, and he was fantastic, even ridiculous, in his rich royal purple robes. He bellowed hoarsely. And from the folds of his robes he plucked, as if by magic, a long and shining dagger.

Jim Saunders now addressed himself solely to the four runaways. Just ahead, glimmering in the lights still burning on the Langpo, was the great basin. The horses were headed straight for it—apparently had no intention of swinging along the rock shelf to left or to right.

When he saw that the maddened horses would doubtless plunge into the water, the vice consul let go the reins, seized Ailena in his arms and jumped clear. They fell, slid and rolled. But neither was badly hurt. And as they

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got up, the horses and the chariot plunged into the water.

Unaware that Hassan was pursuing him, Peter raced down the tunnel. He passed the sixth gate. He reached the ring in the wall. He gave it a mighty jerk.

Instantly, between the fifth and sixth gates, which were slowly descending, the bronze slab swung down. With a crumbling, a thunderous sound of harsh friction, the hidden slab above came smashing down beyond it. It dropped with a tremendous thud—a slab of bronze fully a foot in thickness. For almost four centuries it had waited there for this moment—a grimly ironical moment indeed in the bloody history of the conquering Barbarossas!

For with this act, Peter had, in some degree, revenged the death of Susan O'Gilvie. He had bottled up the Kingdom of the Lost! But his revenge was not yet finished.

A moment after the great slab dropped down, Hassan arrived, knife in hand, upraised.

Peter threw himself at Hassan. And Hassan, in the dim, far light at the end of the tunnel, saw in the adventurer's face such demon ferocity that, in abrupt dismay, he dropped the knife. With a shout of terror, he turned about and fled.

Peter pursued. And it was an amazing pursuit. Slowly the bronze doors were swinging down. It was a question—a great question—whether he could reach the end of that fantastic passageway without being entombed.

He was not thinking rationally or he would not have wasted precious time in stopping to snatch up the dagger Hassan had dropped. But he did snatch it up, and in so doing narrowed his chances of escape still further.

He saw Hassan scuttle under the twelfth and last door. It was dropping rapidly, or so it seemed. It was within sixteen inches of the floor when Peter reached it. He dropped down, rolled under and, as he sprang up, grasped a handful of Hassan's royal purple robe.

He gave this handful of royal raiment such a tremendous yank that it set Hassan toppling off balance. The red-bearded king spun about. As he did so, Peter scrambled to his knees. In this kneeling position, with his left hand, he seized the king's beard. He pulled Hassan's head down close. Gripping the beard, he drove the dagger into Hassan's throat.

Then, springing up, he gave the dying king a great push. It was a final gesture of loathing, but it capped his revenge with a curious and somewhat horrible touch. Hassan rolled so that his head was under the closing bronze door.

And as Peter watched, the door slowly closed, crushing the head of Hassan as if it were an eggshell.

NOW—not till now—did Peter blink the bloodmist from his eyes. He was still thinking only of avenging the death of Susan. He did not know—would never know—whether Jengha was living or dead at that moment. He knew only that Jengha had betrayed a trust, had broken a promise. And he thirsted for revenge on Jengha—on them all—the horrible valley full of them, the scornful, decadent members of the royal family—the countless hideous leprous idiots beyond the great wall.

He would bottle this valley forever—for eternity! Only dimly he saw the four Arabian horses struggling in the deep water of the basin; dragged down slowly, inevitably by the weight of the golden chariot.

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Only dimly he saw Princess Ailena and Jim Saunders in each other's arms near the bow of the Langpo. He shouted at them to get aboard. He was hardly aware of the gray-faced men who swarmed about the ship.

These dull-witted creatures stared at him with awe and confusion. They had seen him kill their king. But whatever their mood might have become, it changed plastically under the ripping fury of Peter Moore's commands.

With his own hands, he swung the sledge hammer against the bronze stud in the black wall which operated the sea gate mechanism. Those mighty bronze doors were swinging ajar as he climbed aboard, shouting orders to cast off the lines, carrying the sledge hammer across his shoulder—his aspect terrifying, his voice savage.

Ailena and the vice consul stared at him as if he had lost his reason. And, in a sense, he had. The fury that filled him was murderous. It surged through him in a fierce and awful tide of hatred and destruction.

He roared and cursed at the ship's officers. He sent them scurrying into the pilot house. Driving them in ahead of him, he gave the signals with his own hand on the engineroom telegraph. And if these signals had not been obeyed, he would have gone below and executed them himself.

The Langpo backed out of the inner basin and into the great outer basin. Peter ordered the ship brought alongside the bronze stud in the black, shining wall. And with the sledge hammer, he struck it a terrific blow.

Then he returned to the bridge and, pacing back and forth, cursing, watched the massive bronze doors swing shut. He now maneuvered the ship until the bows were pointing at the bronze doors. He ordered the engines in reverse. When the Langpo had backed off a distance equal to a dozen times her length, he signaled for full speed ahead.

One of the officers protested. Peter swarmed upon him, battered him down with blows to the face. The Langpo gathered momentum. She was proceeding almost full speed ahead when her blunt bows crashed into the sea doors.

THE effect was, in some degree, that of the irresistible force meeting the immovable body. The doors did not yield. But the bows did. They crumpled. It was surprising how slowly they crumpled. The heavy bow plates buckled and bent and curled with a tremendous snarling, ripping sound. There was clashing and rumblings and explosions. It was like the sounds of an erupting volcano. The ship pressed steadily and irresistibly against the gates, and they did not yield a fraction of an inch.

The momentum of the ship, with engines still spinning her screw at full speed ahead, poured itself out, thoroughly collapsing the bows.

Above the sounds of rending, splitting, bending, buckling metal now came the roar of inrushing water. The Langpo began rapidly to settle by the head.

Jim Saunders was getting a lifeboat ready to put overboard, throwing off the tarpaulin, untangling the falls.

The ship's hull had apparently been opened, by the strain, farther aft. She began rapidly to sink. Now the boilers began to explode, tearing out huge sections of the deck, aft, spraying the water all about with fragments of torn steel and splintered wood.

And in the midst of the tremendous, sustained uproar of a ship disintegrating, there was an amazing develop-

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ment. Peter was left alone on the bridge. As he paced from wing to wing, watching his handiwork, he saw the crew leaping overboard. Each man left on the surface, as he plunged, spreading stains of red. They were committing a form of hari-kari! Each man, as he leaped, plunged a knife into his heart!

It was the final fantastic touch to the most incredible, most terrifying experience Peter Moore had ever undergone. Doubtless, these dull-witted men had been instructed, in the course of their training, to do just this. In the event of capture, in the event of their defeat by any one from the outworld, they were simply to erase themselves from existence!

But even this shocking wholesale suicide of the Langpo's crew was a scene observed through swimming mists. His deeds he saw clearly. He looked with triumph at the great bronze doors. They were forever closed! Even if the frantic inhabitants of the valley should succeed, in time, in cutting through or around that slab of bronze in the tunnel, they would never cut their way through or around these sea doors! The Langpo, now on the bottom, jammed against the doors, would prevent their being opened.

The Kingdom of the Lost was bottled up forever.

How long, he wondered, was forever? How long could they exist without food supplies from the outworld? How long could they exist without salt? With their salt supply forever cut off, would not the leprous idiots in the valley go stark mad? Would they not insanely swarm over the forbidden wall and destroy the members of the royal household? Would not the prisoners, all the prisoners, in that valley suffer a swift moral and physical decay—dying in terror, in frantic agony?

Peter believed so. He had, in effect, issued the death sentence to more than a hundred thousand mortals. Yet he did not suffer the smallest pang of regret.

To him, the valley was not a valley of the living or the dying, but a tomb—a sarcophagus which contained the mortal remains of the only woman he had ever loved—or ever could love.

THE main deck was awash when he went down the ladder from the bridge. But the Langpo would sink no deeper. She was resting solidly on the bottom.

Jim Saunders had cast the lifeboat adrift. He was sitting at the oars, with Ailena, white-faced, sobbing, in the stern.

Peter looked at them for a moment. His face was gray, his eyes were haggard. He had become, in the past few minutes, a changed man—a man immune to the passions and the follies of the world, a man strangely and coldly detached, a man without love of life or fear of death. Thus, completely changed, he faced what life had left for him.

There was a strange and bitter smile at his lips.

Saunders said gently, "We'd better get going, Pete. We've got a long row ahead of us—out through those pinnacle rocks. But there won't be anything to worry about in the Jaws of Hell. You've locked them tight! You've settled that mystery forever. No more vanishing ships!"

Peter did not speak for a moment. He looked at the vice consul, then he looked at the pale and frightened girl as if they were strangers to him.

He said quietly: "I came on this

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trip for two purposes. One was to save the girl I loved from an unknown danger. The other was to secure some diamonds belonging to a friend of mine. At least, I want to be able to say that I've accomplished half of my job."

Peter waded through ankle deep water to the funnel. He climbed the steel ladder to the top. He reached down inside.

Within, the funnel was thickly crusted with soot. In places it was an inch thick. He could not at first find the end of the fine wire he had attached to a rivet head, the rivet and the wire being so thickly encrusted with the greasy black dust. Soot in a busy funnel forms rapidly, like an evil fungus. Very shortly after Peter had suspended the box of diamonds in the funnel, he had known that the wire would be thickly crusted—invisible to the most prying eyes.

Only by tearing the ship apart, piece by piece, he believed, would those diamonds have been found.

He detached the wire and pulled up the little metal box. He rapped it against the funnel as he descended to free it of its thick casing of soot. Reaching the deck, he mad his way slowly to the waiting boat.

THEY were picked up on the second day by a fishing junk out of Hainan. Two weeks later, on a little coastwise tramp, they reached Hongkong. The two men and the girl had entered into a sacred agreement: So long as they lived, they would never mention the Valley of the Lost.

Peter delivered the fortune in precious stones to Dan deSylva, refused to make the slightest explanation, and requested, as payment, the whimsical little elephant-head ring, once the property of the now insane Sultan of Sakara.

He attended the quiet wedding of Jim Saunders and Princess Ailena, and spent their last evening in Hongkong with them—gave them a wedding dinner, in fact, at the Colonial Hotel. The red-haired princess, still too dazed by what she had been through, still haunted by Susan's sacrifice, was only beginning to enjoy civilization. She would, in time, forget and become very happy—because hers was a happy nature.

Their ship sailed for San Francisco at midnight. Peter saw them off. He returned to shore in a sampan. He knew how risky it was to venture on the harbor of Hongkong after dark in an unlicensed sampan.

But he was not concerned over his safety. He was not afraid of a knife between his shoulder blades. He knew that he would never be afraid of death again.

He watched the lights of that fabulous Oriental city as the sampan swung toward Blake's Jetty. Far up on the Peak, the lights mingled, blended with the stars.

Susan had loved Hongkong. She had loved its lights, its fogs, its mysteries, its romance. For a moment, he had the mystic feeling that Susan was sitting beside him. He could detect the fragrance of her hair. He could, for an illusory, fleeting moment, hear the brightness of her gay young voice. Then the magical, intoxicating moment passed.

He sighed. Coolly he contemplated the city of lost dreams. And he wondered what fresh surprises life could possibly hold for a man who feared neither death nor the devil.

THE END

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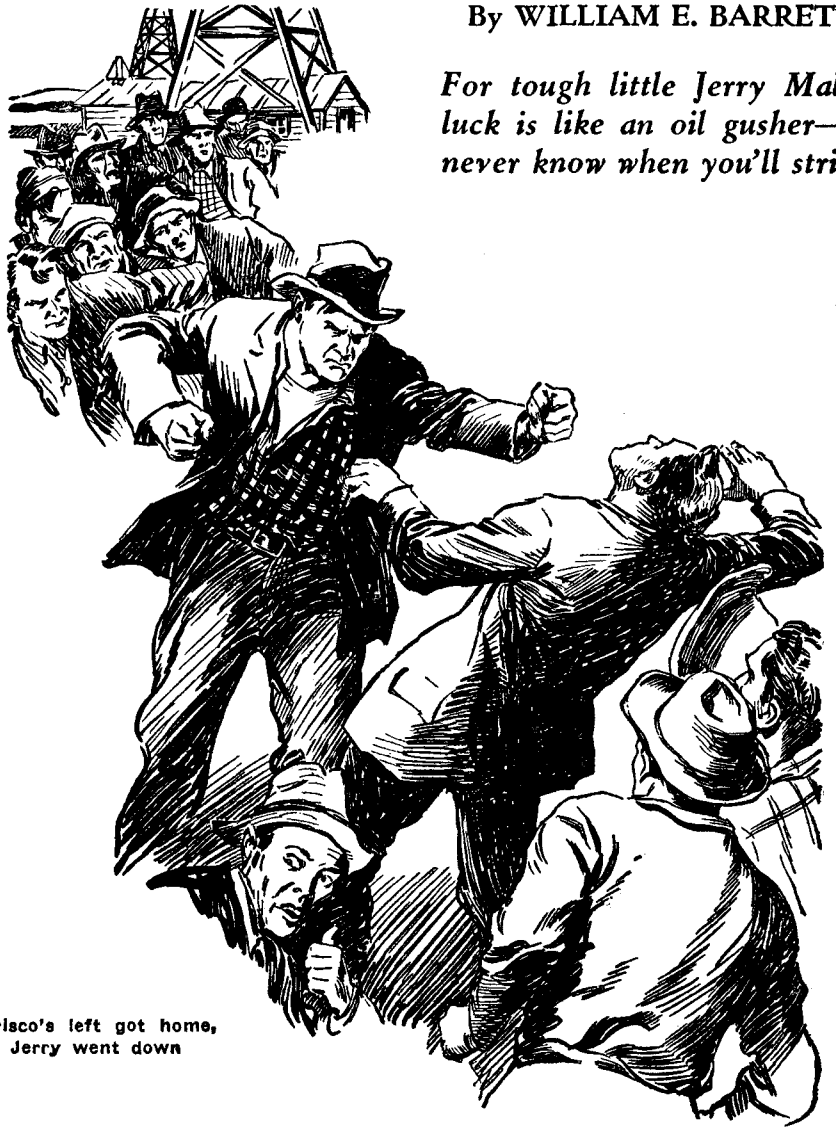
A Ring for Luck

By WILLIAM E. BARRETT

For tough little Jerry Malone, luck is like an oil gusher—you never know when you'll strike it



Big Frisco's left got home, and Jerry went down

FIFTY bucks for one fight! Jerry Malone licked his dusty lips with anticipation as he angled away from the Rock Island tracks and cut out on a long slant for the main drag of Pennant, Oklahoma.

The side glance that he threw toward the group of "depression stiffs" huddled in the shadow of a freight was compounded of pity and amusement. Like himself, the shabby group had traveled into oil country on the evening freight; unlike himself, these others were undecided, now that they had reached a stop-off. Jerry was professional; he was sure of himself,

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with the hard sureness of a youth who has battered a living out of the carnivals, the camps, the long road, and the ring. The difference between amateur and professional technique would be demonstrated in a few moments.

Angling up over the piles of empty cans behind the town, Jerry would presently drift down the drag from the direction opposite to the railroad; the amateurs would huddle there by the track until they made sure that no one was interested in running them away, then they would make a break for the stem and start panhandling—and it would be too bad. Oil country feeds its own, but it cannot afford to feed the hordes that advertise the fact that they are strangers who have just bummed in.

Jerry had the slant. He did not have to argue things over in his mind or pause for decision; experience had endowed him with instinct, and an instinct works while its owner loafs. A somewhat leggy youth, with hard-packed chest and shoulders, flat stomach and capable hands, Jerry Malone fitted into a man's world without a jar. He had been poured into the mold and hardened. His eyes laughed at life, and he endured even hunger with good nature; in the past the appeasing of that hunger had always provided him with adventure, and he lived for the sheer thrill of living. He was plagued by no flaming purpose.

To-day there was a vision of fifty bucks. He whistled softly as he booted cans out of his way and picked a path to the north end of the drag. He had knocked over a big driller, in a rough and tumble ring battle at White Plume, before a two-dollar-a-head crowd. The promoter had only paid twenty bucks for the brawl, but the advertising had been good. Pennant had bid fifty bucks to bring him down—and he was here.

FLAT broke and hungry he emerged at length upon the long and dusty one street of Oklahoma's new boom town. His eyes swept appraisingly along the dusty stem. It was like all of them; hub-deep mud in the middle, flanked by a rough board sidewalk and by unpainted shack fronts. The north end ran to illicit fun — the dance hall, the gambling dives and the dumps. The lower end held the supply houses, the quick-counter joints and the two-dollar flops. He wanted no part of that lower end. If he had to make a connection it would be in the squalid end where people were not conservative. His eyes swept the line of overhanging signs and came to rest on one that stood out challengingly:

THE DOUBLE DEUCE

He licked his lips in anticipation. That was the place. There was fifty bucks almost within touching distance.

His shoulders squared and he took a step forward. Then he stopped abruptly. Something gleamed out of the dust of the road, something that . . .

A son of the road soon learns better than to allow any one to see him pick something up. And so Jerry made a motion as if to brush the perspiration from his forehead. His battered hat toppled off and he swooped for it. When he straightened up he had the gleaming object in the palm of his hand.

He took a few strides toward the swinging sign of the Double Deuce, and opened his hand where light fell across the drag from the window of a shack.

He was both disappointed and intrigued. The object was a plain ring

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formed by the shaping of a silver-plated horseshoe nail. Jerry slowly turned it over in his hand, then dropped it into the change pocket of his trail-worn slacks. He disliked anything foreign on his hands, or in them; those hands not only earned him a living, they kept him alive when the steel rails hummed and a slip meant death.

Before a hastily painted shack which bore the legend "Al Deever—Leases," he came to a stop. His directions had said he would find Deever's office a few steps from the Double Deuce, and the information had been good. Deever, who dealt in oil leases, also hired men who dealt faro and roulette and other games, upstairs in the Double Deuce; but most important to Jerry, Deever staged fights for the boom crowd, and he offered fifty bucks for a tough pair of fists.

A lean, hawk-nosed man was leaning against the Deever shack. He eyed Jerry sharply, but Jerry scarcely glanced at him. As Jerry swung through the doorway, the lounger edged over to a position which allowed him to hear what was going on inside. Jerry didn't see that, and he wouldn't have cared if he had seen it. His business was no secret.

AL DEEVER was alone. A brawny, heavy-jawed six-footer, he sat hunched over a flat table facing the door. He looked up in readiness to turn on his "Yes-sir-we-sell-leases" smile; he swept his hard eyes swiftly over Jerry, and he turned the smile into a grunt.

Jerry grinned. "I'm Malone. Knuckle mechanic . . ."

"Whaaat!"

Deever had been in the act of relighting a stumpy cigar that had gone out. He dropped the match and stared, his eyes ranging over Jerry's lean, hard frame with its hundred and sixty odd pounds of muscle, gristle and hide.

"Malone? You're not the guy that knocked over Blister Tole, at White Eagle."

"I wouldn't kid you." Jerry balanced lightly on his feet, his eyes leveled.

The promoter snorted and waved his hand.

"Some guys will do anything for money!" he said disgustedly. "That's a great act, letting a little guy lick a big one, but it don't go down here. It's too raw. You're too young and too small to sock over a full-grown husky, and this crowd is smart enough to know it."

"Yeah? What about my fifty-buck guarantee?"

Deever whipped the dead cigar along the full length of his lip. "Sorry. The deal's off. I figured you were a big guy who could make it look good . . ."

Jerry's eyes were suddenly cold, expressionless. The lines along his lean jaw hardened, and a tiny blue vein throbbed under his ear. He surveyed the big bulk of the man behind the table without emotion.

"You're full grown, and you aren't crippled any," he said softly. "Suppose you try to throw me out."

The promoter gripped the edge of the table. His eyes widened slightly, and he looked straight into the cold, fighting eyes of the boy from the road. He grunted and relaxed.

"Gutty, aren't you? Well, I like 'em like that. I'll take a chance on you, if you convince these bozos around here that you're tough enough to stand a chance."

"How?"

"Get out in some public spot around here, pick some big brute who'll look good lying down, and talk to him

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like you talked to me. Then prove you can put it out when he takes a poke at you. That'll get you a following, and maybe I can use you . . ."

Jerry grinned ruefully. "*Two* fights for that fifty, eh? I knew it was a gag. —Okay, settler!" He shrugged. "But with a couple of steaks inside of me I'm a lot bigger and a lot tougher."

He tapped his empty pockets suggestively.

The promoter shook his head firmly. "Nothing doing. I don't pay for anything till it's delivered. Pop somebody big so that the crowd'll begin talking, then come back."

JERRY MALONE knew the final word when he heard it. He shrugged again, and made for the door. He felt the hardness of the horseshoe ring through the little pocket, and it brought him no comfort. It was a good luck emblem, but it didn't seem to be working.

"Maybe it takes time for it to get hot," he said philosophically. "Well, that baby was a tough customer for a tryout."

The lounger was gone, but Jerry didn't notice his absence any more than he had first noticed his presence. His instinct was again in command, and he was turning toward the gambling house. He had solved the hunger problem before by being around when some roughneck made a killing and got to feeling like Santa Claus.

One of the few two-story places in town, the Double Deuce, confined gambling to the upper floor. The ground floor was taken up by a long bar and a few tables.

Jerry's interest was upstairs. He turned to the narrow doorway. There was a sudden roar above him, the noise of chairs turning over, muttered curses and then a veritable eruption. A lean, hawk-nosed man came hurtling through the doorway at the head of the roughly built stairs; he fought for balance, and then came down fast in a series of slips and falls that would have done credit to an acrobat.

Jerry had a hasty, photographic flash of the burly bouncer, before the door slammed; then he was stepping aside fast to let the hawk-nosed man hit alone. He couldn't see any percentage in being knocked over by a perfect stranger.

"Damn!"

The man who had been thrown out lit hard, grunted and came slowly to his feet. He looked at Jerry without surprise. He was mussed up, but he wasn't ruined. There was no punch-grogginess about him.

"That bum upstairs is getting too damned smart!" he growled. "Some day, somebody is going to come along that he can't throw out and spraddle him . . ."

Jerry felt the hardness of the ring against his body. His pulses leaped. Maybe this was opportunity; a chance to sock a big galoot in a public place where the advertising would be good, and at the same time, perhaps, to earn a little stake.

"How much is it worth to you," he said, "if I go up there now and take the guy?"

"You!" The stranger did not seem to be as surprised as he acted. "Heck, son, you're too small! This guy is big."

"That's my worry. I asked you how much?"

THE eyes of the hawk-nosed one gleamed, but he managed an embarrassed grin as he fished around in his pocket and came out with four limp one-dollar bills.

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"That's all I've got, and I have to do some eating . . ."

Jerry repressed his disappointment with difficulty. The pressure of the ring did not seem so insistent now. The thought came to him that this guy had a lot of nerve, bucking a gambling house with four bucks.

He shrugged. "Okay. I'll go for half of what you've got. No dinero unless I smear him."

The hawk-nosed man grinned, his mouth twisting in a crooked line. "Swell! The guy's name is Big Frisco. He's the bouncer. He's as big as a California oil rig, and he wears a blue shirt. Just wander up, looking like you look, and tell him to go to hell when he asks you what game you want to play. After that, pull your head in —fast!"

Jerry shrugged again. He started for the stairs.

"You're telling me when to pull my head in! Give me the two skins. If I don't deliver I'll give them back."

The hawk-nosed man passed over the two limp dollar bills, and Jerry mounted the stairs.

The door opened to his touch, and he found himself in a big, bare room which was crowded with a motley group of humans. The click of dice and the hum of gambling talk assailed his ears, and he had time for only a brief flashing survey of the room. The blue-shirted man bore down on him; a hulking brute of a man with a good two hundred pounds of beef on a big frame, a roll of fat around the middle, and a flattened nose that told of one time when the other fellow didn't miss. Big Frisco had been well described.

"What's your game, kid?"

The voice was low, rumbling, ominous; the narrow eyes were suspicious.

Jerry stepped forward. "You're the game, you big lunk! Get that lard out of my way or I'm coming through it."

FOR a split second the bouncer rocked on his heels. His jaw dropped and he stared incredulously; then, with an oath, he dropped into a half crouch and threw his right.

Jerry beat him to the punch.

He had been set to beat him to it, and the minute Big Frisco made his play Jerry boomed his right through. He smiled contemptuously as he came in behind the punch.

"Only a sucker leads his right," he grunted.

The bouncer had done that, and he had left a wide hole for the counter. Jerry felt him reel, and nailed him again with the left, cocking his right for the convincer.

Driven into a table, the bouncer was temporarily rattled; but as he sensed the cessation of play in the room, and realized what was happening to him publicly, he came out of it. With a bull-like roar he came whipping up from the crouch. He led with his right again, but it was the left that came over whistling.

Too late Jerry saw that one coming. It boomed through his guard and sent him smashing back against the door—and the bouncer was right after the punch. For a tick of time, Jerry had the trapped feeling of a fighter on the ropes—only this was worse. There is give to the ropes, and no give to a pine door. He tried to squirm to the right, and then Big Frisco's left hand came up from the floor . . .

When Jerry blinked his eyes open, he was lying at the foot of the steps and the hawk-nosed man was shaking him. The position in which he lay pressed the horseshoe nail symbol of luck into his flesh.

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He squirmed uncomfortably and eased his position. The hawk-nosed man gave a grunt of relief.

"He licked you," he said, "and he threw you down the stairs harder than he threw me."

Jerry struggled up and fished for the dollar bills.

"You're telling me news," he said huskily. "I wouldn't know . . ."

THE hawk-nosed man bought the grub. Over a dark little table in the corner of the Gusher Café, he talked. He was Joe Paxley, and he was a gambler of sorts. He followed the booms, and usually the other gamblers worked with him. Al Deever had cut him out in the cold, and had tied up all of the sucker games in town for himself. Paxley hated him.

"The guy's a crook, kid!" he said. "He can make a load of jack out of selling a good fight to these huskies, but that ain't enough for him. He wants to take 'em down on bets. A boomer'll bet on anything."

Jerry ate gloomily. He felt dispirited.

"That's just what the guy said he didn't want," he said. "He was figuring maybe my fight in White Plume wasn't level."

Paxley laughed bitterly "Sure! He'd tell you that. He don't let too many people get anything on him. But take it from me, kid, he's building up a tough guy in town for this fight; a guy that everybody's going to want to see licked, but that nobody'll believe is going to be licked . . ."

"Who is he?"

Jerry's food interested him more than the fight which he might not get.

Paxley drew nervously on a cigarette. "You wouldn't know him, but he's bigger than you, and the town is going to bet on him. The tramp will take a dive."

"Yeah?" Jerry's head came up. "Maybe he won't have to take a dive."

The hawk-nosed man was smoking and squinting appraisingly through the smoke.

"I was thinking about that. You see, I saw you pop over that big gimp up in White Plume. You're good! But Al Deever saw that fight, too, and he's still playing safe. His man will dive—and Deever will be betting on you against the field."

Jerry was sitting straight up now, his food forgotten for the moment.

"This guy Deever saw me fight?" he said dazedly. "And yet he makes out that he's surprised at me not being a lot bigger; and he tells me to prove I'm tough by slugging somebody."

Paxley laughed. "Sure. He doesn't overlook any bets. You can get the town interested in you by staging a brawl. Besides, it won't look too sour, then, if you lick this big tramp. The roughnecks will figure that they should have known that you were good. See?"

Jerry saw. It was the old army game of the oil field chiselers. The fifty bucks that had looked so big to him would be hard-earned before he got through, and the man who gave it to him would clean up. Worst of all, Jerry would still be fighting in a crooked fight, no matter how squarely he battled himself. He growled under his breath, and shifted irritably. The pressure of the ring in his watch pocket annoyed him, mocked him. Paxley was squinting at him.

"YOU could bust the game wide by taking a dive yourself before Deever's tramp goes down," he insinuated.

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Jerry's chin jutted. "Then *you'd* clean up," he said. "Well, forget it. I never went in the tank for anybody."

Paxley grinned. "I was sure of that. I checked you up. That's fine. I wanted to make sure." He leaned back in his chair and spread his hands. "It doesn't make any difference, at that. We're both forgetting something. You aren't likely to draw any crowd in this town, after taking a quick licking to-night from the Double Deuce bouncer."

Jerry pushed back his chair. He hadn't forgotten.

"That's unfinished business," he said grimly. "I needed grub the worst way, and I didn't know the bum was left-handed. I'm squaring up for that mistake."

The hawk-nosed man grinned, a grin that made a crooked line of his thin mouth. "You're sure you can take him?"

Jerry snorted. "I can take *anybody* who lets me nail him with a straight right like he did. He's wide open."

Paxley's grin stayed put. He took out his watch.

"Big Frisco knocks off for an hour at eleven o'clock every night," he said easily. "That's the best time to call him. Right down on the main drag. You'll have more room than you had upstairs."

Jerry nodded. That made sense. The hawk-nosed man took his arm.

"You've got a three-hour wait. Don't let your nerves get tight." He was wadding the two bucks back into Jerry's pocket. "Better shoot some pool with the boys. I'll introduce you. I'll be busy for a while, but I'll be back to see you rap the big ham. It's just as well to keep your mouth shut till you pop him."

Jerry shrugged. "I don't do my fighting in pool halls."

Joe Paxley grinned again. "Right," he said.

THE pool tables were old and the floor uneven, but that made no difference to Jerry Malone. He was playing to kill time, and the khaki-dressed crowd talked his language. No one was trying to shark a living with the cue; a man could just enjoy himself.

The minutes rushed by. At the end of an hour the regular patrons were puzzled and the wizened proprietor had a dazed look. There were too many people coming in; jostling, roughly dressed, booming-voiced men from the fields who h u n g around a few minutes, watched the slender hobo shooting very bad pool, and went out again laughing. Jerry, who had never been in the place during a normal evening, noticed nothing unusual. He was merely killing time.

The old clock on the wall, which had served in scores of hastily built towns, had a convulsion every quarter hour. Something within the ancient works whirred and coughed and clicked. On the hour it boomed. It had just finished the ten forty-five when Jerry racked his cue. He fished out the crumpled bills, settled, and walked out.

There was no fear in his breast, and no doubts as he walked up the teeming drag. There were more people jostling along the boarded walks than there usually were, but he didn't know that.

His fingers touched the horseshoe nail ring doubtfully. He wasn't sure, now, that there was any luck in it.

"A lot of things have happened to me," he muttered, "and maybe the ring caused some of 'em. But I wonder which of 'em wouldn't have happened if I hadn't found this ring."

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His brow furrowed. The question was too knotty for him. The fact that he was well fed decided the problem, and he took his hand away from the watch pocket. A man who had enough food in him wasn't jinxed, and that was a cinch.

The swinging sign of the Double Deuce jutted out ahead of him, but he did not quicken his steps. Leather-pushing had taught him his patience, and he usually let the dubs race across the ring to him. In a long fight the man who crossed the ring most often used up the most energy. The principle was sound, even when a man was brawling for the advertising it gave him.

A TOWERING figure emerged suddenly from the narrow doorway of the gambling house; a cocky, swaggering figure of bulk and muscle and bulging waistline; a brutal figure with a sailor roll that emphasized the breadth of shoulder and thickness of chest. Jerry stiffened; his eyes narrowed to thin slits, and his chin went down on his chest. He took one step which put him squarely in the big man's path.

"Just a minute, bum! How would you like to take a poke at me when I ain't hungry?"

Big Frisco came to an abrupt stop. He was not a fast thinker, and it took a little while for ideas to soak in; but he saw what Jerry Malone hadn't noticed — the swift gathering of a crowd that seemed amazingly adept in smelling trouble.

His small eyes glittered suspiciously. "What's this, a frame or something?"

Jerry was standing with his hands down, his weight balanced forward. "Are you going to come and get it, or will I bring it to you?"

Frisco's answer was as sudden, as brutal and as abrupt as the man himself. He gave a strangled curse and leaped forward; his right hand coming up with murderous speed.

Jerry Malone was waiting for that. He pulled his body down from the waist, and as the right whistled past his rolling head, with scant inches to spare, he stabbed out with his left. Big Frisco's momentum carried him into that stiff arm, and Jerry's right came up like a rocket. The swiftly gathering crowd gasped collectively as the bouncer went down.

Big Frisco rolled, spat and came up. One shot from a hundred and sixty pounds seldom keeps two hundred pounds on the ground. The bouncer snarled, and came in fast, behind his guard. No longer was he bulling his luck by fighting straight up; he was pumping his corded arms like pistons from a half crouch. Jerry Malone back-pedalled, his eyes narrowed.

It was going to be hard to slash through that barrier of beef, as long as Big Frisco remembered the defense, but . . .

Jerry went suddenly flat-footed and threw his left. Big Frisco brushed it aside with his right and came up with the left uppercut that had chilled Jerry Malone earlier in the evening. Jerry wasn't taking it now. His right fist snapped up over the whistling left, and hooked to the bouncer's jaw. Big Frisco went back on his heels, his left flailing wildly. Jerry nailed him twice more before he regained his balance; then the kid from the road slipped back out of range. He was breathing a little hard now.

BIG FRISCO shook his head and came in. He could take a lot, and this was not the ring. Already Jerry's hands were feeling the shock of

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impact with that much weight; and there were no ropes here for him to play off, and no taut, fast canvas to give wings to his feet. He weaved under Frisco's punches, and stabbed desperately back. The bouncer's lips snarled over his yellow teeth, and he kept coming. He missed with a right, and took two punches; missed with a left and took two more; missed with the right again and—then his left got home.

Jerry felt everything inside of him turn over. A wave of black started in his heels and raced along his nervous system till it exploded in his brain. He felt a pit opening under his feet, and something hard crashed him as he went down. The right had come through in the wake of that murderous left . . .

Frisco cursed, and launched a foot into Jerry's side. The kid jerked back to consciousness with the agony of it, rolled fast, and made a grab at the bouncer's foot as the man launched another kick. A quick twist, and the bouncer went over. Jerry got a knee under him, tensed his muscles, and hurled his body. He hit Big Frisco like a catapulted rock, and one knee sank into the roll around the bouncer's middle. Frisco gave a yelp of agony, kicked out futilely with one foot, and made a grab for Jerry's arm with one ham-like hand.

If that grab had been good, the fight would have been over. The man had brute power enough to tear the kid in two. Jerry was squirming, however, as the hand darted out. He slapped it aside and sprang back on his haunches, coming to his feet with a tremendous effort of will. The wave of blackness was still running up and down his body like an elevator gone crazy, and he fought to keep it from hitting his brain once more. His legs wobbled, and there was a dull ache in his side. He could taste the bitter salt of blood on his lips.

Big Frisco was steadying himself on his fingertips; a ridiculous, bear-like figure, balancing on all fours, his small eyes gleaming viciously. For a block either way on the drag the crowd was jammed solidly. Men climbed on roof tops and balanced on the shaky support of door frames for a better view. Voices called out encouragement and advice that was lost in the wordless mob noise of combat-stirred men.

Sucking the air deep into his lungs, Jerry Malone looked at the crouching Frisco. Dimly he sensed the crowd, but it had no reality for him. Only Big Frisco was real; and the bouncer, he knew, was resting, gathering his great strength for the overwhelming rush that would beat the younger man down and leave him helpless under the stamping boots.

And Jerry Malone was fighting this kind of battle merely to advertise a fight for which he would get fifty bucks.

THE thought of the fifty bucks swept through Jerry's brain and helped to steady him. They had had him groggy before, and these big huskies in the oil towns always had some weakness or other. He remembered that shrill yelp of agony when his knee had sunk into that belt line fat. Okay . . .

With a heave, Big Frisco came up. Jerry saw a blur of massive, hurtling flesh, and his instinct told him that he had no guns that would even slow that charge, much less stop it. He threw his body to one side as a football tackle throws his body. As he hit the dirt he rolled like an acrobat, and came bouncing to his feet. Big Frisco, a muscle

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machine gone amok, sensed the fading-out of his foe too late. Full-tilt, he hit the alarmed, cursing, milling crowd. Four men went down under his rush, and he cursed them for being in his way. Turning ponderously, he set himself for another charge back.

At that moment Jerry Malone struck and he caught his man when the wheels weren't turning. He had a big mountain of flesh to fire at instead of a charging madman, and he took a chance on a palooka trick. He threw his right, and put everything in his lean body behind it.

His hand sank to the wrist in the roll of fat about the bouncer's middle, and Big Frisco turned green. He reeled, hit out wildly with his right, and pulled his left down to his shoe tops. An agonized sweat stood out in beads on his forehead.

To Jerry Malone his opponent looked like a slow motion picture. His own hands were in motion. His left—only a trifle less effective than his right—went out straight, with the ramming power of a turbine shaft. Again the belly fat took the shock. Big Frisco's left wabbled, coming up, and Jerry's right whipped it. Hard over, with the whipping power of a snapped drill cable, that right hand jammed against the bouncer's button.

Big Frisco's greenish-hued countenance looked like paste; his small eyes goggled wide open; his jaw dropped. Then his knees buckled and he pitched forward. Jerry Malone turned his back and spat the blood out of his mouth. He didn't have to look at Big Frisco any more. When they fell on their faces they were through.

All about him a stunned bunch of huskies milled. Rough hands clapped him on the back, snatches of speech came to his ears.

"Best fight I ever saw!" . . . "Betcha he cleaned up a million!" . . . "Who'd 'a' figured that little guy would—?" . . . "If I'd seen it in the ring I'd have yelled fake!"

THE words were just a jumble. Reaction had set in, and the kid was feeling wobbly. He looked around for Joe Paxley, but he saw only unfamiliar faces; hard, brown, wind-dyed faces.

Suddenly there was an eruption in the crowd. A big locomotive of a man ploughed through, stared once at the prostrate Frisco, and vented an explosive oath. The crowd had fallen back a little, and most of the men were grinning. One bold spirit called out mockingly:

"There's your tough bouncer, Deever. Cold as a chisel."

Another man had just turned Big Frisco over. The bouncer was still cold, and the man grinned.

"If I was the kid," he said, "I'd have this brute's head mounted, like them moose hunters do. It'd go swell over a mantel!"

Deever stood with clenched fists. But he saw the temper of the crowd, and there was nothing he could do. Pennant, Oklahoma, was enjoying itself over the fall of a bully.

Deever's eyes rested on Jerry Malone and his lips curled.

"Smart guy, ain't you?" he snarled. "Well, that'll cost you just fifty bucks. That's the guy I was building up for your fight, you mug!"

He wheeled on his heel, and Jerry started after him with wide eyes. He remembered suddenly what Paxley had told him. Deever was crooked, and he was building up a guy that everybody would hate and that everybody would want to have licked and that every-

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body would consider unbeatable. And that guy would take a flop which would bring Deever a bunch of dough.

"What a droop I was!" he muttered. "I should have guessed . . ."

He was pushing through the crowd, shaking off the hands that would have detained him.

"And I was getting my brains battered out, just to get a crack at fifty bucks, when all the time I was socking myself right out of the money," he said bitterly. "If that guy Paxley . . ."

HE stopped suddenly, and it all came to him with a rush. Paxley must have known who he was, and Paxley must have overheard what Deever said to him. Paxley hated Deever and wanted to spoil Deever's frame-up. He had known the man Jerry was slated to fight, and he had framed the whole business; had got himself kicked out of the Two Deuces so that he might egg Jerry on to picking a scrap and . . .

Something hard pressed against his weary body, and he dropped his hand, closing it over the hard outline of the horseshoe nail ring. He drew it out, staring for a moment at the shiny hardness of it. A growl rose in his throat. "Lucky! Lucky for what?"

A dark slit between two buildings across the way attracted his eye, and he heaved the ring into the slit. Then, with his hands rammed deep into his empty pockets, he started down the drag toward the dark lane beside the tracks.

"And I thought those depression bums were dumb!" he muttered.

A thin hand fastened to his shoulder before he had taken three strides. He whirled and found himself staring into the hawk-nosed countenance of Joe Paxley. The gambler was grinning—a grin that made a crooked line out of his thin mouth.

"I've been looking for you, kid. You were swell! Best fight I ever saw, and . . ."

Something in Jerry's eyes warned him, and he backed up.

"Whoa! Wait a minute!" he said. "I told you that Deever was a cheap bum. He offered you fifty bucks for two fights, didn't he? Well"—Paxley was digging into his pocket—"I'm paying you seventy-five for that one alone, kid."

"Seventy-five!"

Jerry gulped hard and stared down at the crumpled bills which Joe Paxley was stuffing into his hand. The hawk-nosed one was making low, chuckling noises.

"Sure, Kid! I just made the clean-up that Deever figured on making—only I didn't have to pay a guy to take a dive. I'd seen you fight and I believed in you. None of the guys I sent down to the pool hall to look you over thought you had a chance. I got odds . . ."

"And you had dough all the time? You framed this up so you could bet?"

"Sure. You wouldn't kick about that, would you?"

"Hell, no!"

Jerry stuffed the bills away dazedly, and was suddenly aware of an empty feeling in the region of his watch pocket. With a muttered apology he wheeled and darted across the drag toward a darkened slit between two buildings. Joe Paxley's eyes widened.

"Hey—what's the matter?"

Jerry Malone did not stop. "I lost something over here," he said huskily. "Something I've got to have.—Me, I never could figure luck."

THE END

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Argonotes

The Readers' Viewpoint

ARGOSY pays $1 for each letter printed. Send your letter to "Argonotes" Editor, ARGOSY, 280 Broadway, N. Y. C.

HAVE we told you about the great new novel by Borden Chase and Edward Doherty which will come to you in the issue for October 6th? Look for a five-parter called "East River." It's about the two-fisted, hard-drinking heroic guys who risk their lives by tunneling through the muck at the bottom of great metropolitan rivers—risk their lives in order that office workers and bank clerks and shop girls may speed to work on subway trains in perfect safety.

And here's another piece of news about the same story, "East River." Fox Films is rushing to completion a picturized version of this story, and the film will star Victor McLaglen and Edmund Lowe, who made fame for themselves as Flagg and Quirt in the immortal "What Price Glory?" and again in "The Cock-Eyed World." Having read the new story ourselves, we can tell you right now that the tale provides this pair of rough-neck actors with plenty of opportunity to be their swashbuckling selves. We'll lay a bet—once you've read the story, you'll want to see the film!

JIMMIE CORDIE fans get a break over the air. Readers who live in the vicinity of Springfield, Illinois, will be glad to know that they can tune their radios in on one of the stories. *Cordie's* creator, W. Wirt, has given his permission to broadcast the story called "What Kept You?" over Station WTAX (1210 kilocycles, 100 watts) during the month of September. For four weeks, one evening each week. Look up the day and the hour in your local newspaper. *Jimmie* ought to "go great guns" over the air.

HOW old are parachutes?

Meadow Grove, Neb.

I have just finished reading Ared White's story, "The Spy at Charleville." I am not attempting to criticize his work, but would like an explanation on one point. In the story the hero, *Captain Steele,* uses a parachute to drop from the plane into German territory. I have been under the impression that there were no parachutes—or at least none used—that early in the war. In all the fiction I have read of the earlier part of the war, I have never heard of a pilot using a 'chute, and so I naturally thought they had not been invented at that date.

Perhaps you will tell me when the first parachutes were used.

RALPH ADAMSON.

THIS fixes their age:

The first parachutes were used over a hundred years ago. But even during the latter part of the World War the parachute mechanism had not been perfected to the point where the swift "bail-out" of pilots was possible. That was a development which followed the end of the war by several years. However, even much earlier than the period of "The Spy at Charleville" parachutes were being used for the landing of secret agents from airplanes and balloons. I know this from personal observation, particularly in the case of observers leaping from captive balloons as their balloons were attacked by enemy sky squadrons. Invariably the parachutes landed them safely below.

ARED WHITE.

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HEROES in strange and far lands:

Belmont, Mass.

Hear my plea for more pseudo-science novels, and more stories of weird things. But—do not print a hackneyed story about the hero going to some strange land, becoming a leader against the bad "Bchnkt-men," meeting a swell looker and then having her kidnaped, finally to be rescued by the hero. *Clinch!*—And why not have the readers vote on the best stories, and then put the stories chosen in a reprint edition, so that your new readers may enjoy the classics that they have missed?

G. LEIGHTON BEDFORD, JR.

CLUB for *Hazeltine*—brickbat for Author Worts:

Brooklyn, N. Y.

I have just finished reading Worts's latest *Gillian Hazeltine* story, "The Honest Forger." The story ends with *Hazeltine* holding a club over "*Eggs*" *Emerald's* head, the threat to prosecute him for a crime committed some *fifteen years before*. It seems to me that it was a pretty small club, as the Statute of Limitations would long since have outlawed the prosecution of that crime. Does Worts expect us to believe that a smart crook like "*Eggs*" *Emerald* would give up his entire fortune of one million dollars so easily, when any first year law student could have told him that he was safe from the clutches of the law?

(MRS.) CELIA SHEDLER.

BRING authors back alive!—

Bronx, New York City.

Having nothing else to do on a rainy night, I decided to look over my collection of ARGOSYS of the past year or so. I soon found out that by merely examining the table of contents of the past 50 issues a great mystery was easily seen. The mystery, in short, was the disappearance—or shall I say the lack of appearance?—of certain authors. What has happened to George Challis? Has Frank L. Packard been kidnaped during the recent crime wave? What sinister mystery lies behind the disappearance of other favorites? Perhaps my fears for their safety are all wrong. After all, I suppose they merely went into retirement. If they did, please try to bring them back as Frank Buck did his jungle beasts, alive and kicking!

ALFRED E. SCHEMPF.

LOOKING AHEAD!

RIVER RAIDERS

A millionaire yachtsman is warned not to sail up a jungle river. A complete novel of treasure and treachery in the African wilds by

F. V. W. MASON

The Kid from Hell

A Western badman fights his way along the busy, one-way track that leads from Hell to Paradise. And that's a tough road for any hombre to follow.

A new novel by

J. E. Grinstead

Military Prisoner

They doubted it at first, but he turned out to be the toughest in the Legion. "I'm bad when I'm drunk," he told his companions; "very bad."

A novelette by

Georges Surdez

COMING TO YOU IN NEXT WEEK'S ARGOSY—SEPTEMBER 29

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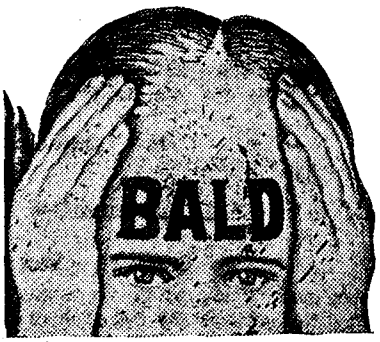
WHY MEN GO



Science Finds New Way to Remove Germ Cause and Activate Dormant Roots to Grow New Hair.

(Read Free Offer)

A germ called "Flask Bacilla of Unna" gets deep into the scalp skin in many cases of abnormal hair deficiency, causing a most dangerous type of dandruff. It clogs up pores and hair follicles, causing itchy scalp, falling hair, and prevents dormant hair roots (papilla) from growing new hair. The germ is seldom suspected. Washing and shampooing and use of tonics, ointments and lotions don't remove the cause. They merely cleanse and treat the surface and roll off th outer skin like water rolls off the back of a duck. No wonder baldness is increasing.

Now a new discovery enables people who have dandruff, falling hair, thin hair and baldness to harmlessly remove the congested, thin outer layer of scalp skin. This permits opened pores to breathe in air, sunshine, and absorb a penetrating, stimulating scalp-food to activate the smothered, dormant hair roots and grow new hair. It is the most sensational discovery in the history of falling hair and baldness. It is all explained in a new treatise called "GROW HAIR," showing "anatomy of your hair" and tells what to do. This treatise is now being mailed FREE to all who write for it. Send no money, just name and address to Dermolay Lab., Desk 84, No. 1700 Broadway, New York, N. Y., and you get it by return mail free and postpaid. If pleased, tell your friends about it.

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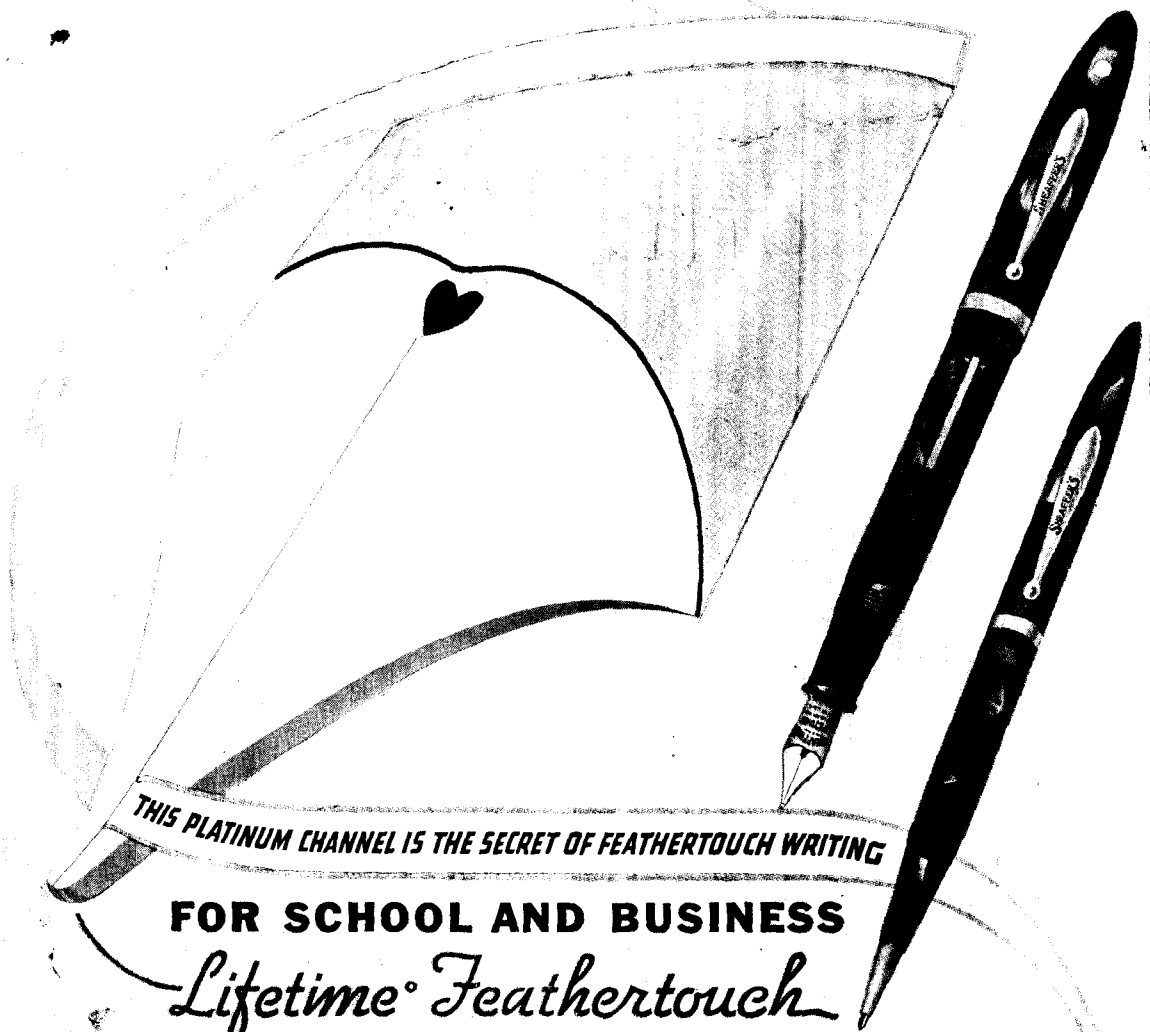

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a place where another trail came in. Both horses was shod the same an' both had a number two shoe. Both tracks went right to the Triangle wagon. We found Ames there an' we knew he was a killer, so we took him in.

"The afternoon before Ames made his break, I talked with him. He told me that he wasn't goin' to stay in jail. He said that he'd get out, that he had too much on Overman for Overman to let him stay there. I thought he meant that Powell an' them had hired him, but it wasn't that. Ames had trailed Powell back to the Triangle wagons. He knew that Powell had killed Laird an' he just kept his mouth shut, knowin' that Powell would get him out.

"Yesterday, when I was in the jail, I was foolin' around with the gun Ames had when he tried to make his break. I pulled the lead out of a shell. I thought maybe it was a reloaded shell an' that the bullet hadn't been seated good, an' I went to dump the powder charge in my hand. There was sand in the shell in place of powder.

"The night Ames tried to break out, when Laramie an' me went down to let Joe go to supper, Joe told us that Powell had been into the jail. It's a safe bet that when he was there he gave Ames that gun with sand in the shells in place of powder. He knew that Ames would be killed when he tried to make his break. You see how it hangs together, Barney?"

"Yo're guessin'," Loveless said hoarsely. "You'll never make that stick in a court, Chet."

"But I'm right," Chet insisted. "It's got to be that way. Ames an' me had quite a talk. He was sore at me for bringin' him in, but he said that he didn't kill Laird. Then he made that break about havin' somethin' on Powell that would get him out of jail."

"But the girl," Loveless expostulated. "She knew who the father of her baby was. She could have spoke up an'—"

"Powell would have killed her too," Chet said with assurance. "He wasn't takin' chances. But he figured that Laird was the most dangerous. He could send a little money over to Rosa an' keep her mouth shut. Likely she was in love with him an' didn't want to hurt him. When she found out that Laird was dead she got desperate an' couldn't see a way out, so she killed herself."

CHET paused and Barney Loveless said nothing. Chet could almost see the thoughts working in the older man's head. "Powell crippled me, too," Chet said casually, almost as an afterthought. "Ben Revilla told me how he did it. Powell was right behind me when I roped that bull an' he hit my horse with his rope just as the bull took the slack out. The horse jumped an' was jerked over. Ben saw the rope marks on my horse when he brought the horse in."

"Powell Overman," Loveless said slowly. "You can't prove a thing, Chet, but you're right. What do you think you'll do?"

"I meant to kill him," Chet said, his voice hard. "Now I don't know."

"Why not?"

"Sally Laird is back," Chet answered. "I talked with her. I don't know what I'll do, Barney, but I can't let Overman get away with it. If he does, the next thing we know there'll be another like Ed Ames in here. The whole country will be stirred up. Overman is at the bottom of all the trouble, Barney."

Loveless nodded agreement and again asked: "So what are you goin' to do, Chet?"

"I think," Chet said slowly, "that I'm goin' to lay it on the line to Powell. I'm goin' to tell him what I know. Then what I do depends on what he does. Sally says—Sally don't want it to go any further than that. If Powell drops the whole thing, if he pulls out an' doesn't come back, it won't go no further. I'll do that because Sally wants it that way."

"But if Powell don't?" Loveless questioned.

"Then I don't know," Chet admitted. "I'm goin' to lay it out for him though."

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"You think a lot of Sally, don't you?" Loveless said. "You think she's about right."

Chet took a deep breath. "Sally," he said. "Sally . . . well, they broke the mould when they made her, Barney."

"Are you an' Sally goin' to hook up?" Loveless asked bluntly.

"I won't see her again," Chet answered. "She's done with me. She said so. But I've got to go through with this, Barney. Hell, I'm human! Powell Overman kicked me into the gutter an' I'd be there yet if it wasn't for you an' Joe an' Doc Laird an' Sally. I owe him for that. But I could let that go if it wasn't for this other thing. You see how it is, Barney?"

"I can see better than a woman," Barney Loveless said. "When are you goin' to see Powell, Chet?"

Chet shrugged. "There's no hurry. I'm goin' back an' help Joe with the roundup. Powell won't leave the country. He'll be here. After we get through, will be time enough."

"I'll be along when you tell him," Loveless said suddenly. "You won't be alone."

Chet got up from the bench. "Now you see why I ain't goin' back to Rock Springs," he said. "I'd like to accommodate you, Barney, but I don't think I will."

"We'll see," Loveless drawled. "You goin' on to camp now, Chet?"

"Right away." Chet agreed.

"You goin' to tell Joe an' Laramie about this?"

"No. I'll not talk to anybody till I talk to Powell."

Loveless nodded approval. "Tell Joe I'll be up to camp tomorrow or the next day," he said. "An' Chet, you think this over. You size it up all the way around, an' remember I'll side you when the showdown comes."

"Thanks, Barney," Chet said. "I'll remember. But I've already thought it over."

He went out of the house, the old man following him. Chet said goodbye and rode away toward the north. Barney Loveless watched him go. When Chet had disappeared, the old man brought out a plug of tobacco from his pocket, bit off a chew, and when he had the cud under control, spat into the dust of the yard.

"A woman is always raisin' hell with a man," Barney Loveless said. "Always! Now there's a right good boy. Just a pretty fair sort of hand. Damn it! I guess I'd better . . ."

Loveless did not say what he had better do. He went to the corral, caught and saddled his wrangling horse and rode out into the horse pasture. Half an hour later he returned with the horses. From these he singled out his buckboard team and put on their harness. An hour after Chet Minor's departure from the Screwplate, Barney Loveless also left the ranch. Barney Loveless drove south, toward Rock Creek and the Laird claim.

CHAPTER XXI

SCREWPLATE GOES TO TOWN

AT THE end of June the Screwplate wagons pulled into the ranch. They were done with the branding. Now came the season when the Rifle Rock made hay and then would follow the beef roundup. The wagons would go out again when that time came, but until then there was an interlude.

Chet Minor did not join in the hilarity of the rest of the crew. All through the last of the work he had been silent and sober. Now he turned his horse loose, put his saddle in the shed and went to the house.

The Bar 07 riders had dropped out at Stevens' ranch, and so only the Screwplate had come in. Sven Olson and Hall were going to stay at the ranch that night and then go on home. Jesse Lauder, Earl Keelin, Laramie, Joe French, Chet—these were the real Screwplate men. Chet could not account for the way he felt about the Screwplate. He belonged there, it seemed to him.

The morning after the wagons had come in Loveless paid off. He gave the riders their checks, and he hired Hall and Sven to go on the hay work. The

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money that would bring would be a godsend to the nester families down on Rock Creek.

Chet was the last man that Loveless paid, and he held Chet awhile, talking to him after the rest had gone out. "I fixed things up in Rifle Rock for you, Chet," Loveless said. "When you go to town you'll find some money in your name at the bank. That's for you to use to pay your pre-emption."

Chet nodded abstractedly. "I'll get a deed made out to you as soon as I get a patent," he said.

"All right," Loveless agreed. "Now about that other thing, Chet: Are you goin' through with it?"

"I said I was," Chet answered.

"But are you?"

"Yes."

"Are you goin' to town today?" Loveless persisted.

"I thought I would," Chet said. "Barney, I'd like to buy two horses. I'd like to buy that buckskin horse I broke down at Rock Springs, an' I'd like to buy old Jug. Will you put a price on them?"

"I want forty dollars for the buckskin," Loveless answered. "I'll take twenty for Jug. I wouldn't let him go at all except that I know you'll look after him. Jug don't owe the Screwplate a cent. He's paid for himself."

"That's good," Chet said. "I'll pay that. You can take it out of this check, or I'll pay you in town."

"Make it in town," Barney answered. "We'll settle the whole thing up in town, what I owe you for the claim, an' all."

Chet nodded agreement. "I'll have to ride this saddle you loaned me, goin' in," he said. "I'll get a saddle in Rifle Rock. I hocked one with Wayt Higlow."

Joe French thrust his head in through the door. "Are you goin' in, Chet?" he demanded. "We're about ready."

"Coming," Chet answered. "Are you goin' to town, Barney?"

"I think I will," Loveless said. "Tell Amador to hitch up my team."

Chet went out and Barney Loveless sat behind his desk awhile, looking far away and tapping the desk-top with his gnarled old fingers. Then he got up stiffly, started toward the door, and stopped. He returned to the desk, got a blue-barreled gun from a drawer, checked the loads in the cylinder and put the gun in his waistband.

WHEN he went out, Amador had the team ready and the riders were saddled and waiting. Chet had the old saddle on the buckskin colt and was leading Jug. Loveless climbed up into the buckboard, took the lines from Amador and grinned wryly at his men.

"Let's go, boys," he said. "Sorry I kept you waitin'."

Out of deference to their boss the Screwplate hands did not push on to Rifle Rock. They followed behind the buckboard, Laramie riding with Chet and Joe French, Keelin and Lauder behind them.

Laramie looked at Chet's bed lashed to Jug's back, and asked. "Goin' to pull clear out of the country?"

"Maybe," Chet said.

Laramie grunted. "I left a country once," he announced. "I wouldn't go back there."

"I won't be back here," Chet said.

Loveless kept the team moving right along. Indeed the buckboard made as fast time as a saddle horse, the only difference being that the buckboard had to follow the road.

It was mid-afternoon when the Screwplate reached Rifle Rock. Other outfits had preceded them. Rifle Rock was teeming with activity. This was the end of the spring roundup; extra hands had been paid off and the regular crews from the ranches were in town spending their money. The Fourth of July was near and Rifle Rock always staged a celebration on the Fourth. On the flat outside the town preparations were under way for the festivities. As they rode past, the Screwplate men eyed the platform that was going up.

"Big time on the Fourth," Joe French

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called. "We'll just stay in an' see it."

Riding down Idaho Street, Chet saw many acquaintances. There were riders from the Triangle, from the AC, from the Gunhammer. There were men in from Neil's Rocking Chair and from Bob Jumper's JAK. Nesters, too, were in town, and Chet saw Stevens of the Bar 07 standing on a corner talking with Jim Clarke, the sheriff, and Martin Gardner, the district attorney. Stevens called to Chet and came out into the street. Chet rode over to the ranchman.

"We've just got hold of Julio Tidd an' Frank Oakes," Stevens said. "They were brought in this mornin'. Gardner wants to talk to you about what Revilla told you. You goin' to be loose pretty soon?"

"Sure," Chet agreed. "Any time. I'd like to put my horses up first."

"We'll meet you down at the Staghorn," Stevens said. "In about twenty minutes. Will that be all right?"

Chet nodded his agreement and rode on to rejoin his friends. They went to the livery barn, and there, turning their horses over to the hostler, they separated.

In the Staghorn Chet met Stevens and the two officials. Clarke had nothing to say to Chet, but Gardner asked him questions concerning the statements Ben Revilla had made about the rustlers. Chet answered these and Gardner was satisfied.

"We're going to hold a preliminary hearing in the morning," he said. "You'll be there?"

"I'll be in town," Chet answered.

"At the justice office," Gardner amplified. "All right, Mr. Minor, we'll expect you."

Chet excused himself and went on out. He had to meet Barney Loveless at the bank.

He spent an hour or more at the bank in consultation with Loveless and Claypool. There was the matter of the claim to settle. Claypool drew up the necessary papers and accompanied Chet to the United States commissioner's office where Chet paid the pre-emption price and proved that he had resided at the Rock Springs claim for the prescribed length of time. Laramie and Joe French were called in to act as witnesses.

Back at the bank again, Loveless and Chet reached a fair agreement as to the value of Chet's time and his homestead right. Barney would pay Chet as soon as the land patent came through. And then the business was finished and Chet went out on the street. He had not seen Powell Overman since his arrival, but he knew that Powell was in town. Otto Hahn, at the Staghorn, had told Chet that the Triangle was finished with the spring work and that Overman was at the town house. He had been about to tell Chet something else, but Stevens had come up then to claim Chet's attention and Otto left to attend the wants of other customers.

The thing Otto Hahn had begun to tell Chet when he was interrupted, was a rumor that had spread over Rifle Rock. It was being talked in the homes, whispered whenever two women met, mentioned, low-voiced, in the stores: the rumor that Maida Overman had left her husband.

TO RIFLE ROCK it was only a rumor, but to Powell Overman it was grim reality. He had come in from the round-up work, tired, worried, and with guilt hanging heavily upon him. It is one thing to kill a man in desperation; it is quite another to continue living after having committed murder. Not that Powell Overman regretted having killed Dr. Laird, nor did he regret the fact that, as truly as though he had pulled the trigger of old man Sykes' shotgun, he had killed Ed Ames. The murders bothered Overman no more than the suicide of Rosa Revilla. Relief was his principal reaction when he thought of Rosa and Laird and Ames.

The thing that preyed heavily upon his mind was the fear that he would be found out. That was the thing that made him lie awake at night, that put the haunted, worried look in his eyes. And when he returned from the ranch, the spring work

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completed, he found his wife gone away with Kirkpatrick.

There was a note in his bedroom. Powell read the note and went downstairs to question the housekeeper.

She knew but little. Mr. Kirkpatrick and Mrs. Overman had been gone two days, she said. Mr. Kirkpatrick had taken his luggage and Mrs. Overman had taken a grip. The drayman had come for Mrs. Overman's trunk. Aside from that, the housekeeper knew nothing, even though she suspected a great deal. She did not mention her suspicions.

Powell Overman, with the note still in his hand, went into the office. Seated at the desk, he put the note down before him and stared at the wall. After a time he picked up the note and read it through once more.

> ***I am going to Kansas City with Norville. I will divorce you there. You have nothing to offer me and I am tired of living like a savage. Norville promises me everything I want. If you do not contest the divorce you may remain as manager of the Triangle. That should please your vanity. If you choose to contest my divorce there are many things that I can bring up. You must use your own best judgment in the matter, but I believe that you will see the wisdom of keeping quiet. You will hear from me through my lawyers very soon.***
>
> ***Maida.***

There it was, bald and bare-faced as a Hereford calf. Powell Overman crushed the note in his big, blunt fingered hand and threw it from him.

Powell did not leave the house that day; he did not go out until late in the evening of the second day. He could not go out. He knew that Maida's departure had been noted and that it was being talked about. How could he go out on the streets of Rifle Rock and face the curious stares of the people that he knew? It was an impossibility. He drank a little while he stayed in the house, not a great deal but enough to build up a fine, keen edge to his anger. When he did leave the house late in the afternoon of that second day, he was not drunk, but he was red eyed as an angry rattlesnake—and as dangerous.

There was a certain bravado in Powell Overman that finally sent him to the heart of Rifle Rock. He had hidden his hurt and shame, but now he was ready to appear and challenge anyone who dared to comment. For months, all through the roundup, Overman had worn a gun strapped about his middle. He put on the weapon before he left the house.

CHAPTER XXII

THE FAST GUN

ON IDAHO STREET Powell Overman strode along, his head up. He walked past Wolfbarger's, nodding to Tom Neil who stood there, but ignoring the lesser lights, the riders that spoke to him. On down the street he went until, before the Bon Ton store, he stopped. Royce Mitchell was leaning against one of the posts that supported the awning in front of the Bon Ton, and Powell engaged in conversation with Mitchell.

Chet Minor and Barney Loveless emerged from the Staghorn with Laramie and Joe French following them, on their way to supper. The pleasant evening light that follows sundown in June was on the street, clear and sweet as spring water. Chet Minor saw Powell Overman pass by, and stepped forward, but Barney Loveless restrained him.

"Not on the street," Barney said.

"Where else then?" Chet demanded. He pulled free from Barney and limped hastily along. Across the street Overman distanced the limping Chet. It was not until Overman stopped to speak to Mitchell that Chet came abreast. Laramie and Joe, sensing that something was afoot, and hurried after Chet. But Barney Loveless stopped when Chet started across the street and spoke to his men.

"Don't come over," he said sharply, "but watch close."

Laramie and Joe stopped on the side-

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walk, and Loveless hastened across the street after Chet.

Overman was standing on the porch of the Bon Ton, and so when Chet came along the sidewalk in front of the store, he was considerably below Overman. Chet stopped there, his head about level with the other man's waist, and said abruptly:

"Can I speak to you a minute, Overman?"

Overman looked down at Chet's set, earnest face, and turned back to Mitchell. "As I was sayin' . . ." he began, ignoring Chet.

"If you want Mitchell to hear what I'm goin' to say, all right," Chet interrupted, his voice low but very distinct.

Royce Mitchell looked at Chet and then back to Overman. "I'll be inside the store when you're finished, Powell," he said. Overman did not answer and Mitchell walked away.

"Well," Powell Overman said harshly, looking down at Chet, "what have you got to say to me?"

"Just this." There was no hesitation in Chet's low voice. "I know that you killed Doc Laird, Overman. I know all about it. I'm layin' it on the line for you."

Barney Loveless stood perhaps five feet behind Chet and to his right. Across the street Joe French and Laramie were watching intently, and other men on Idaho Street, seeing Chet Minor talking to Powell Overman, stopped to watch.

For half a minute after Chet's statement, Overman made no move, did nothing. He was motionless, staring down at Chet Minor. But slowly his long face changed color, at first suffused and then the blood fading from it, leaving a pallor beneath the tan. His eyes narrowed now.

"I know it," Chet said again. "I'll tell you—"

Powell Overman's voice was hoarse as he interrupted Chet. "I wish I'd killed you. I tried to, an' all I did was cripple you. I wish I'd killed you!"

The two men saw only each other now. In this meeting they had no thought of the others around them.

"I know that, too," Chet began. "You—"

"You know about me an' you know I killed Laird," Overman rasped the words. "Do you know that Maida's left me, Minor? You know so damned much—"

The words broke then, changed swiftly into action. Powell Overman's big hand lifted and went back to the gun at his hip. The Colt cleared leather, swept up and a shot crashed in the quiet of Rifle Rock.

Chet had half expected this. Still he did not move to defend himself. "Overman!" he said again, his voice raised now. "Overman . . ."

Barney Loveless had leaped to the right, away from Chet. Barney was tugging at his waist, the hammer of his gun caught in his vest. Across the street Laramie had shoved a hand into his shirt and was pulling the gun he wore there. Once more Powell Overman dropped his gun in line, his thumb pulling back the hammer. Chet saw the madness in the man's eyes; he stepped quickly to the left and his gun was in his hand.

The crash of the 32-20 was sharper, more whip-like than the roar of Overman's .45. Dust whipped up from the street behind Chet Minor. A man yelled on the sidewalk, frightened by the whine of the ricochet that whimpered past his head. On the porch of the Bon Ton store Powell Overman stood bolt upright; he teetered there just at the edge for an instant; and then with all his long body rigid, he came falling down into the dust of Idaho Street.

Across the street Laramie came running. Barney Loveless stopped the useless struggle with his fouled weapon. From the jail office, directly opposite the Bon Ton, Jim Clarke burst out, a gun in his hand.

THEY took Chet Minor into the jail office. Jim Clarke had the 32-30 he had taken from Chet's lax hand; and Barney Loveless, Joe French and Laramie had formed a compact bodyguard about Chet.

They kept Chet there while out in

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Idaho Street Vance Murray dealt with the surging crowd, while Martin Gardner, summoned from the hotel, fought his way to the jail. They kept Chet there for a long time, until the crowd outside had quieted and the light was gone from the streets of Rifle Rock, until Barney Loveless, fierce as an old eagle, had shouted down Jim Clarke and Gardner and forced them to listen.

It was Barney who told the story. Piece by piece, he followed through the events that had led to Powell Overman's death.

"You can't make nothin' of it but self-defense," Loveless concluded. "Overman pulled his gun an' shot. He was ready for a second try at the boy. I'd of shot him myself if my damned gun hadn't got the hammer caught. I wasn't goin' to have Chet killed. It was self-defense an' that's all there is to it; but if you want to try to make somethin' else out of it Chet will go on the stand an' tell the whole story.

"You ain't goin' to look very good if he does that, Jim, an' there's goin' to be some cowmen around here explainin' how they came to hire a killer like Ed Ames.

"I'll leave it to you an' Gardner. You do what you want, but Chet'll have the best lawyer in the state if it comes to a trial, an' when we get done Hell will look like a summer holiday compared to Rifle Rock."

Gardner turned from fierce old Barney Loveless and called Jim Clarke aside. They talked in the little corridor that led back to the cell, while Vance Murray stood beside the window and looked out.

Clarke and Gardner came back. "We've decided," he said. "It was self-defense, pure and simple. We'll present the evidence to the coroner's jury in the morning. Jim is going to talk to Mitchell and some of the others and I don't think there will be any trouble." There was a significance in the last sentence that made old Barney and Laramie and Joe French smile grimly.

"And there is no need of airing this before the public," Gardner concluded. "Do you think so, Mr. Minor?" He looked at Chet, standing motionless beside the office desk. A smooth man, Gardner—a politician who could sense the direction of the wind.

"I told Barney," Chet said, his voice expressionless. "Barney an' me an' the ones that are here, are all that know."

Gardner looked at the men in the room. He smiled, as though asking their approval for the thing he was doing. "The Scotias are an old family here," he said. "There is no need of airing soiled linen Can't we drop it here and forget about it? Mr. Minor will come free on a self-defense verdict, and we can let it rest."

Laramie and Joe French nodded. Old Barney Loveless looked pleased, and even Jim Clarke's sullen face lighted a trifle.

"We're all agreed," Gardner said. "Mr. Loveless, I'll release Mr. Minor in your custody. You'll be at the inquest in the morning. I think it's perfectly all right for you to go now."

Joe French and Laramie stood up. Barney put his hand on Chet's arm. "We'll go to the hotel," he said. "Come on, Chet."

And Chet Minor allowed the old man to lead him out of the office.

CHAPTER XXIII

ROPE YOUR DOGIE

BARNEY LOVELESS passed up the Fourth of July celebration in Rifle Rock. The festivities went ahead, despite the death of a prominent citizen, for Rifle Rock did not mourn Powell Overman particularly. Somewhere a rumor had leaked out, a grim rumor concerning Powell Overman and the deaths of Laird and Ed Ames. Rifle Rock buzzed with the talk and looked slant-eyed at Tom Neil and Royce Mitchell and the other cowmen. The cowmen acted as though nothing had happened.

Old Barney had some heavy arguing to do that day. For Chet, with his saddle reclaimed from Wayt Higlow, his two horses and a bed roll, was ready to leave the country. A jury, skillfully led by Martin Gardner's questioning of witnesses,

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had exonerated him of Powell Overman's death; but still that thing hung heavily upon him. He wanted to leave town.

Barney did considerable talking, invented excuses, and as a last resort explained that Chet must go with him to the Rock Springs and there point out the exact corner stakes of the claim. Barney Loveless who knew every foot of the country from Rifle Rock to the Tramparas, asking for help in locating corner stakes!

So, on the morning of the Fourth, with Rifle Rock already getting a little high on liquor, with the bunting draped over the store fronts and with the flags flying, Chet rode out with Barney Loveless in the Screwplate buckboard.

Chet did not want to talk and Barney respected his wish. He drove his team along, humming a little tuneless song, looking at the good green grass and the blue sky and the plump backs and rumps of the bay horses. The buckboard rolled along and the wheels sang on the soft dirt of the road. Where the road forked, Barney turned north and Chet spoke.

"You can take that other road and go straight across," he suggested. "The creek isn't up an' you can make the Rock Springs ford."

"I know it," Barney answered, and kept on driving north.

The road turned west again, dropped into the creek bottom, climbed out and crowned a rise. Down to the creek bottom again the road went, and then the buckboard came around the bend and Dr. Laird's house, with the barn, the cowpen and the pile of hay that was left from winter, was spread out before them. Barney drove the buckboard to the fence, stopped, and climbed down.

"Better get down, Chet," Barney suggested. "I've got to stop here a minute."

"I'll wait here," Chet said dully.

Barney Loveless grunted and walked off in the direction of the barn.

There was the sound of a small foot crunching on gravel and Sally Laird said, "Chet."

Chet turned at that and looked down at the girl who stood beside the rig. Then he stepped out of the buckboard.

"Sally," Chet said hoarsely, "you've got to know. I killed Powell Overman."

The girl's face was white, but her eyes were clear and steady. "I knew that, Chet," she said.

"You knew . . ." Chet blurted out. "You knew and still you come to me like this? Sally—"

"Won't you come in the house, Chet?" Sally Laird asked, and walked slowly toward the stoop.

Chet stood stock still. The girl reached the entrance, stepped up and turned. Then Chet Minor, half stumbling in his haste, went to her. The door closed behind them.

Barney Loveless came out from the barn where he had been standing, and walked to the house. Shamelessly he peered through the window. Then, shaking his head, he squatted down beside the house, his back against the wall.

There were plans in Barney Loveless' shrewd old head, plans for the future. The country was settling. There would be difficulties in that process.

It would be fine to have a neighbor like Chet at the Rock Springs. Barney had plans for that. Fall was just a month or so away and in the fall an election would be held. Barney Loveless had plans for the election. He was an old man and he had no child. He needed a young man on whom he could unload the burden of the Screwplate, someone keen enough to learn the mysteries of buying and handling cull cattle.

With a heave and a grunt and a scowl, Barney Loveless got up. Once more he peered through the window, long and steadily. When he turned around he was grinning with satisfaction. There was no danger, from what he had seen, of Chet Minor's leaving the Rifle Rock. No danger at all. A woman's arms would hold him there, just as they were holding him now. Barney Loveless squatted down beside the wall and went right on with his planning.

THE END

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The Time Is At Hand

By JOHN AMES YORK

Author of "Show Me the Way to Go Home," "Requiescat in Pace," etc.

AN ARGOSY ODDITY

ANTHONY GREGG noticed him particularly because this was a semi-private elevator and he did not remember ever having seen the little man before. He thought he knew by sight all the executives in the Tidewater Building. This man, for all the square assurance of his face and the comfortable brownness of his bald head, looked a trifle seedy.

He waited there, seeming in no hurry, and the doors did not close until Gregg himself was inside.

"Good morning, Mr. Gregg," said Operator Merrick deferentially.

Gregg only grunted. His mind was at work draining a swamp in Rio de Janeiro, damming a flood in Colorado, launching a freighter from an Eastern shipyard. Already he had forgotten his unobtrusive companion.

When he reached his own floor, the top one, he noted vaguely that the little man was still in the car, and wondered what business he had up here. But the stranger made no move to get off, and Gregg heard no sound of following footsteps as he walked to the door of his own private office.

He inserted his key in the lock, turned the knob.

"Mr. Gregg?" said a voice right beside him.

He turned, startled. The little man stood there.

Angrily, Gregg brushed him aside. "Sorry," he said. "Just back from Washington. No time to see anyone today."

"But you must see me." The man spoke quietly, but very firmly.

"No," said Gregg. He slammed the door behind him, in the little man's face, and heard the lock click.

He went to his desk at once, tossed his briefcase upon it, and sat down. It was all there, in that briefcase, ready for him to add the finishing touches—and a tough two days' work it had been.

There was an office memo on his desk from Carson, the head bookkeeper. There was a note to see his doctor today for a checkup, And a long note from Miss Byers explaining that his wife had called, that it was young Bob's birthday and they were going up to the country for a party. Couldn't he possibly come . . .?

Impatiently, he brushed all these aside, opened the briefcase and spilled its papers out upon the desk. He scanned them briefly, noting with quick precision just the items yet to be dealt with. Then he pressed a button and spoke through the inter-office phone.

"Miss Byers," he said, "get hold of Carson. Tell him I want all the figures assembled on the Walling Dam project. Not later than eleven o'clock. And get me Sedgwick on the phone—R. M. Sedgwick—at once. My wife . . .? Asked you especially to plead with me to come . . .?" Gregg

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laughed shortly. "Now, you know I can't possibly go today, much as I'd like to. Pick up a present for Bob—you know what to get—and send it up to him. That's right . . . and I'll want to see Mallory . . ."

He went back to sorting out the papers. He tossed blueprints impatiently aside. Contracts and figures were what he wanted.

It seemed oddly stuffy, difficult for him to breathe. Had Miss Byers forgotten to open his windows? He looked up—and started.

The little man was sitting there, knees crossed, right beside his desk.

"You!" Gregg exploded. "How the devil did you get in here?"

"I'm awfully sorry, Mr. Gregg, but it was inevitable that I see you."

"Who are you?" snapped Gregg. "What the hell do you want?"

"Some call me by one name," said the little man imperturbably, "and some by another. Mr. Gregg, I have come to take you away."

Gregg scowled. He took a step around the desk as if he meant to attack the intruder. Then he stopped short. His hand went up to his heart.

Sharp, biting pain had seized him there. Was that what the doctor had warned him about? The blood drained from his face.

The room began to move. He sat down and the room whirled about him ever more swiftly. He seemed the center of a vast whirlpool, himself unmoving.

Yet the odd thing was that though all the room about him whirled, the little man seemed to sit there, imperturbable, just where he had been.

The whirling swept to a fierce crescendo and stopped. A great quiet was all about him. It seemed that even his thoughts must shriek aloud in this quiet.

YES, this was it; he knew it now. He knew who the little man was and what he wanted. He knew it could not be escaped, and he was terribly afraid. The little man was forever as unshakable as he had been when all else in the room was whirling. . . .

"But not now," Gregg said, and his voice was a whisper. "You can't do that to me now. Take someone else. This matter of the dam. There's millions involved. Just give me another month. . . ."

The little man shook his head. That was all of him that moved.

"A week then," said Gregg. "Don't you see, there's a ship that—"

Sadly, it seemed, the little man shook his head.

"Even a day," Gregg implored. He could not raise his voice, though he wanted to scream the words. "There are people waiting; some of these things must be settled. . . ."

The little man shook his head. He raised the forefinger of his right hand. His lips formed the soundless word: "One minute."

One minute, Gregg thought. His eyes strayed toward the hands of the ship's clock on his desk. Thank God for that, at least. For a moment he had thought that perhaps it was already over.

Yes, at least there was time to do something. Time to do enough so that afterward they'd say: "Anthony Gregg was a man for you. With his last breath he mustered the strength to settle his most important affairs, left nothing hanging. He went out with his hand on the helm and his course set straight."

He got out his pen, reached for the contract on the Rio job. Should it be that, a thing that would set the freighters to plying, strengthen the friendship of two nations? He rolled the thought piously over in his mind. Half-consciously, he looked up at the little man, but the square face was devoid of all expression.

Well, he could do just enough to cinch the dam construction. That would warm up a sluggish industry, make jobs for thousands. . . . He looked again at the little man, and still the face gave no expression.

Well, maybe the other, then . . . He'd jot down instructions to Sedgwick. Did the face of the litle man bear the tiniest trace of a smile as he reached for blank paper?

He couldn't have told. He was busily writing now. He began his note:

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My dear wife and son—

He wrote on, furiously. The phone rang and he did not hear it.

His eyes went to the clock. The minute was gone and he had not finished. There was so much to say, so much forgotten in the short busy years behind him.

"One minute more . . ." he whispered.

No answer came. He looked up.

The little man no longer sat in the chair.

Gregg stood up, startled, to look around the room. He stumbled. The floor of the room seemed to sweep up to meet him.

HARDLY a moment later, Gregg came back to consciousness to find himself sprawled full length upon the floor. Dazedly, he got up. There was none of the pain in his breast now.

He looked around his office. It was empty. Did the outer door move just a little as he looked, or had he imagined it?

He walked over, slowly, opened the door and stepped out into the hall. The hall was empty, but he saw that the elevator was standing open. He stepped back and got his hat and came out again.

"What floor, sir?" asked the operator.

"Floor? What floor?" said Gregg. "Why, I'm going—going home. Merrick, tell Miss Byers, will you? Tell her on that Carson matter, the devil with it. Tell her when Sedgwick calls he can go to hell. I'm off for the country—maybe for a day, maybe for a week. None of their business."

"Yes, sir," said Merrick. He started the car. "You feelin' all right, Mr. Gregg?"

"Quite all right," said Gregg. "That man . . . that little fellow who rode up with me . . . Did he go?"

The operator looked at him curiously. "Why Mr. Gregg," he said, "there didn't nobody come up with you. You was the first man I took up this mornin,' and all by yourself. I didn't see nobody, anyhow."

Gregg nodded. "You're a very fortunate young man," he said, and added, "Perhaps we're both lucky."

The Enemy Within

THE termite has always been an insect with a passion for anonymity. Like the greatest minds, it labors without a thought of public acclaim, happy in the knowledge that the rafters will eventually crumble to dust, the building will collapse upon its inhabitants. Because the termites have always gone about their work with secret malevolence, it is probable that right now they are heartily cursing Grover Whalen.

You see, the termites are going to be on display at the World's Fair. Since they accomplish $40,000,000 worth of damage a year in the United States, the officials of the du Pont Exhibit have decided to give them an important billing. Visitors to the Fair will discover a termite colony where the insects will exhibit their evil under glass. No doubt they will work hard, too, for no man has dared to call the termite a slacker; but they will work with the bitterness of insects betrayed. And we predict a large public for the termites. While guns thunder in Europe and headlines scream of war, men and women will stand in silent fascination before this small enemy who shares their homes.

—*J. Wentworth Tilden*

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Argonotes.

The Readers' Viewpoint

EVERY once in a while we run into the apprentice writer (this is usually a spirited and bouncing authoress with a silk umbrella and a gleaming eye) who assures us that she understands how it is, but come now, won't we admit that we never so much as look at a story by an unknown, unless the writer has that mysterious and unpleasant-sounding attribute known as "drag."

When we hastily assure her to the contrary, her knowing expression gets to resemble the look of a member of the homicide squad confronted with a murderer he has caught red-handed. We, it is clear, are not fooling *her* any.

Of course, this complacent omniscience totally freezes our memory, and we are unable to produce a single instance to prove the absurdity of the legend.

We return to the office, rifle hastily through recent issues, go through a mild spasm of "Why didn't I think of *him?*" and slowly recover.

Recently, for instance, we printed a novelet, "The Secret of the Silent Drum" by David V. Reed, a young author we'd never heard of before. At the moment, we are running the first published work of a gifted new mystery writer: "Cancelled in Red" by Hugh Pentecost; and Mr. Pentecost finds himself brushing shoulders—not uncomfortably, we trust—with an old master-fictioneer, Fred MacIsaac.

For we believe that our job is twofold: both to discover and encourage new talent, and to continue to give our readers, as far as possible, the work of old favorites, long established in popularity. And may we repeat—in neither case does the author have to be related to us by marriage.

SPEAKING of old favorites, here comes a staunch and virulent defender of A. Merritt, at whose "Ship of Ishtar" one luckless E.R.G. took a backhanded buffet not so long ago.

J. H. MASON

It is common knowledge that most great men who have thoughts that differ from the common run of life have been scorned and ridiculed—by those who have not been able to understand any departure from their limited horizon of knowledge.

Such is the case with the gentleman (?) who is afraid (and probably ashamed) to sign his full name to his accusation in the March 4th number of ARGOSY, posing under the initials E. R. G. To elucidate, E. R. G. said, verbatim, that "The Ship of Ishtar" was "only a falsely dramatic fairy tale."

A. Merritt is a veteran author of some of the best fantasy that has ever been produced—there have been enough thinkers with intellect enough to appreciate good literature and literature with some depth to it in the reading public to win him renown.

But, to take E. R. G.'s accusation. "Falsely dramatic" means, of course, making untrue pretentions to drama. Now, if you are going to try and tell me that Kenton's unprecedented transition from world to world and the ultimate conflict between the forces of good and evil were not *drama*—and I *mean drama*—I'd say, and I am sure there are many who will agree with me—that E. R. G. is *non compos mentis!*

Next, he dubs it a "fairy tale". It seems to me that a great majority of fairy tales are wont to culminate with ". . . and they lived happily ever after." Of course, it is easily seen how absurd it is to call "The Ship of Ishtar" a "fairy-tale".

It is therefore obvious that E. R. G.'s ire over his own ignorance and incompetence to exercise his imagination—if he has one; I doubt it—has led him to give vent to his emotions upon the author. And, also obvious, that he has no right whatsoever to slander such a masterpiece of the bizarre!

Toronto, Ont.

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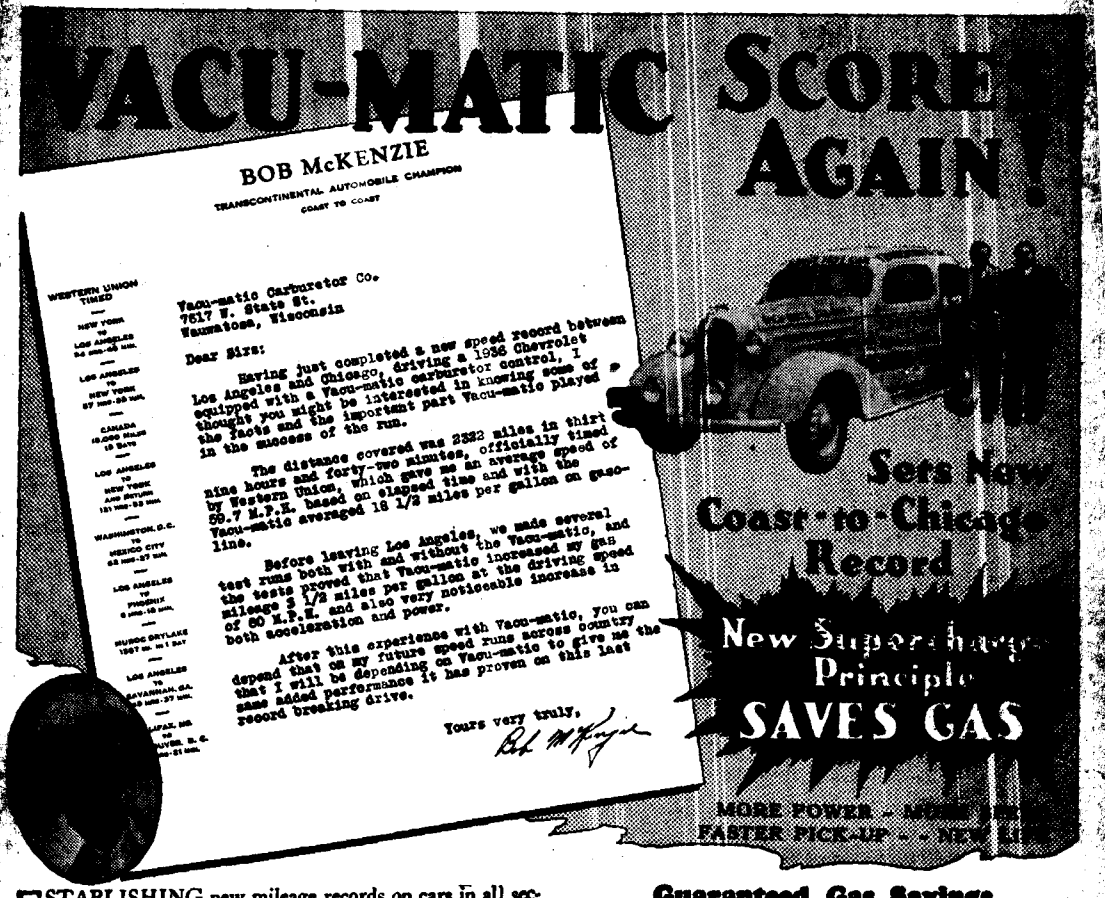
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